

True Colors

by NetRaptor

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Summary: A stranger arrives on the Floating Island and calls on Knuckles' honor to let him stay. Knuckles lets him, and they become friends ... until the day a beautiful girl also appears on the island ...

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****True Colors****

By K. M.
Hollar

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1 Samuel 16:7b: God does not see the same way people see; people look at the outside of a person, but the Lord looks at the heart.

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Prologue

=====

It was a dark and stormy night. Rain poured from the black sky above, driven by the fierce wind that churned the ocean to froth. Lightning flashed and thunder trailed behind like drum corps.

The Floating Island was half a mile above the ocean's whitecapped surface, weathering the storm patiently. The young forests drank in the water like a parched desert, their wilted leaves filling out and lifting against the wind like defiant hands. The air was refreshingly cool after the previous week of 100 degree weather. The island's guardian had secured the island's hovering trajectory and was dozing in his hut, listening to the pounding of the rain on the roof. This was a small spring thunderstorm and didn't hold a candle to the hurricanes he had experienced.

Far out in the storm, a mile distant from the island and twice as high, a thin voice cried desperately for help. It called twice more, then fell silent. The night was black as pitch, rent occasionally by energetic lightning. Suddenly, over the eastern half of the island, two glowing specks could be seen--one red and one green, like eyes. They descended slowly toward the island's surface and abruptly winked out.

A scrawny, ragged figure dropped straight down and landed with a grunt on the muddy ground. He lay still, eyes closed, for a long moment as the rain plastered his soaked fur to his body. Slowly he lifted his head; he must get out of the rain. He tried to climb to his feet, but his legs would not support him. He sank to the ground again, nearly dead of exhaustion. He sat quietly for several minutes, gathering his strength, head bowed against the wind. Again he tried to stand, and this time he succeeded. He swayed, the rain riving against him, eyes turned toward the horizon. After a moment lightning forked across the sky with a deafening crackle and boom, illuminating the landscape in stark white light. As darkness fell the stranger stumbled forward; he had seen a grove of trees not far from where he stood. They said never to take shelter under a tree in a storm, but he was desperate and there was no other protection anywhere.

The trees were saplings--hardly thicker than a man's wrist. They offered meager shelter from the elements. Indescribably weary, he curled in a miserable ball in the lee of the biggest tree, covered his head with his arms and waited for the night to end.

Chapter 1:
Talon

=====

Dawn crept across the sky, snuffing out the stars and bathing the world in a fresh, silvery light. It illuminated Knuckles, silhouetted on the tip-top peak in the island's center, facing east and sniffing the gentle breeze. The storm had passed, the sky empty of every cloud but for a few smoky remnants in the north. The island exhaled an intoxicating aroma of damp spring earth, blooming flowers, young leaves and life. The island's guardian was breathing breath after deep breath of these scents, a choking delight growing in his chest,

charging him with adrenaline. Presently, nearly drunk with it, he leaped off the peak, did a backflip and came out of it gliding.

He investigated every inch of his island from the air. When he began to drop too low he circled back to the mountains, climbed up and leaped off again. It was his method when the sun had not yet risen and there were few updrafts. He observed with pride how well the groves of young trees were growing, and with pleasure passed over fields of pink, yellow and white wildflowers. He was certain they had not been there two days before ...

Knuckles as turning back toward the mountains for another climb when something caught the corner of his eye. He banked to one side, eyes probing. There it was again--not an animal--someone walking. He squinted. No, it was not one of the Chaotix; this was a total stranger.

Stern territorialness replaced his earlier mood of exuberance. He spiraled down and landed off to the stranger's right, behind a large rock. He crouched and peered around it, but there was no need; the stranger was looking directly at him. The stranger lifted both hands, palms outward, to show he was unarmed. Knux would not have cared if he had been. The echidna stepped into the open and paced toward the stranger, head down and fists clenched.

The stranger saw a burly, tough, well-fed crimson echidna with long dreadlocks and eyes of fire. "He must be the guardian," the stranger thought, eyeing the white crescent on Knuckles's chest. His eyes lingered a moment on the oversized fists with the thick spikes protruding from the knuckles. Probably not the kind of person you would want mad at you. Again he held out his hands, palms outward.

Knuckles saw a thin, mousy-colored creature with large brown eyes. His fur was matted with mud and damp with the night's rain. He was so dirty his color was nearly indistinguishable, but it seemed to be a gray-brown. His hands were small and slender, but each finger was tipped with a long curved claw. On his feet were a pair of oddly-shaped shoes or boots, also too grimy to see much of.

"What's your name and what are you doing here?" Knuckles growled, thumping a fist suggestively into his palm.

"I am Talon," the creature replied. "I am an anteater. Am I correct in assuming that this is the Floating Island?"

"Where did you think you were?" Knuckles replied.

"The mainland, actually. That was my destination. I had no idea your island was anywhere near, sir."

"How did you get here?" Knuckles questioned, still deciding how to react to being called 'sir'.

Talon appeared at a loss for words. "I ... I ..." he faltered. "Well sir, you might say I flew."

Knuckles looked him in the eye suspiciously. Talon did not flinch and returned his stare. "You don't have wings."

"No sir."

"Okay, forget how you got here. I'll get to that later. WHY are you here?"

"I lost my way in last night's storm, sir. I was very tired, and in the lightning mistook your island for the coast. I will depart at once if you so wish, sir."

Knuckles didn't trust him. The 'sir' thing, the reference to flight and the anteater's long claws put him on his guard. He beckoned. "Come with me. I want to take you someplace secure."

"Yes sir." The stranger took three steps forward, faltered and swayed to and fro.

"C'mon!" Knuckles said impatiently, half expecting to be attacked at any moment. But Talon did the last thing he expected; he took another step forward, groaned and fell on his face.

The echidna's eyes widened in horror. The anteater's upper back and shoulders were crisscrossed with long bloody gnashes, like those of a knife or a whip. The wounds were dirty, the fur around them crusted and stained in a gruesome fashion. They were not old.

Knuckles shook the fallen stranger, but he was in a faint of exhausted pain and did not respond. Knux stood up and looked around at the clear morning around him. "Why does this always happen to me?" he shouted.

* * *

Talon did not reawaken until a few hours after noon. In that time Knuckles and the Chaotix washed his back and tended the awful wounds. He was so filthy nothing more could be done with him, so they covered him with a blanket and left him sleeping on the sofa in Knuckles's hut.

Knuckles recounted to his friends the odd conversation he had had with the stranger, and of his tendency to call one 'sir'. He concluded with, "I am NOT gonna play nursemaid to him. As soon as he wakes up I'm packing him off to the Freedom Fighters. No stranger had ever been welcome here, and he ain't gonna be the first."

"No, he'll be the second," Espio the chameleon piped up. "Sonic was welcome here." He snickered.

Knux frowned at him. "That was only AFTER I saw I could trust him. I can't do that with this guy--I have no idea who he is or where he's from."

At two in the afternoon, Knuckles was called from Hidden Palace by Vector the crocodile via communicator. "He's up, Knux. He took a bath, ate three times his own weight and now he's asking for you."

"Tell him I'll be along shortly," Knuckles sighed, gazing regretfully at the notepad in his hand. He had made progress in translating the inscription on the blue super emerald pedestal and hated to leave it. He thrust the pad into his pocket and headed for the teleporter.

* * *

Talon was sitting in one of the two chairs at the table when Knuckles entered the hut. The anteater stood and bowed slightly. Knuckles looked him over. With the mud gone from his fur, Talon was rather sharp-looking. He had a black stripe that ran down his forehead to the tip of his pointed muzzle. This was flanked with two narrow white stripes that encircled his eyes. His chest was marked with a broad black band that swept up over his shoulders, also rimmed with white. His forearms were a cream color, and the fur around his wrists was black, like natural wristbands. His claws were dark metallic gray and looked uncomfortably sharp.

Knuckles's eyes dropped to the newcomer's shoes. These, too, had been cleaned, and were so brightly colored they contrasted sharply with the earthy tones of their wearer. Both were a bright blue with black straps across the tongue, like those on rollerblades. Two crests or wings stuck up on either side of Talon's red socks-- rather unusual. A bit of the soles curved up at the toes and heels--one foot was red and one green.

"Nice shoes," Knuckles commented.

"Thank you, sir," Talon replied.

"What'd you want?"

To ask if I might remain here for a while."

Knuckles's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Why? I thought you wanted to get to the mainland ASAP."

"I did last night, sir, but the Floating Island is a much safer place for me to be."

"Why? You hiding from somebody?"

Talon looked at him frankly. "Why do you think I bear whipcuts on my back?"

"Who did it?"

"The ones I am hiding from."

"Who are they?"

"My cousins. They would have me slaughtered."

"What would you say if I said heck with you, I don't care what your trouble is, you're outta here?"

"This, sir." Talon drew himself erect, although it pulled at the cuts on his shoulders, and said, "Knuckles Echidna, Guardian of the Floating Island, I plead sanctuary by the oath of the Ancient Guardians."

Knuckles fell back several paces. The young anteater was gazing at him with eyes of ice, hands at his sides, motionless. "How ... how did you know about the oath?" Knuckles stammered.

"I am not a fool, sir," Talon said coolly. "I have studied history before. You are obliged to give me protection."

A bit of his studies slipped back into Knuckles's shocked mind and he smiled suddenly. "Yes, but I am not bound by my promise unless you have the Palace seal on your person."

A silent dare passed between the two. Abruptly Talon became meek again. He sat down in a chair and said quietly to the floor, "If you please, sir, I have something to show you."

"The seal?" the echidna replied sarcastically. His dander was up.

Talon beckoned with a clawed hand and lifted one foot, sole outward--the red one. Knuckles inched forward, teeth clenching and unclenching. He was sure he would not like this. He knelt and examined the shoe.

At first he saw nothing but the criss-crossed treads. Then he noticed the circle in the arch of the shoe--the circle with the elongated diamond and the crescent moon beneath. Knux caught his breath and grabbed Talon's foot with both hands. It was the Palace seal, stamped into the rubber sole. No, it was not rubber ... more like a very tough plastic, almost like glass.

"It's the seal," Knuckles admitted grudgingly. "I am held to my oath. You can stay here as long as you need ..." Abruptly his ferocity returned. "... but pull any pranks and I will conveniently forget my promise. Got it?"

"Yes sir."

Chapter 2: A reluctant
friendship

=====

Chaotix Central was a large clearing adjacent to the huts of the islanders. The grass was kept clipped, and so was a great place for kickball, wrestling and a myriad other activities the group engaged in. The trees formed a wall about it, all in various stages of leafing out. A large beech, one of the few survivors of the terbium, towered over the rest, shedding a dappled light across the lawn. The light was green and gold of early afternoon, and a delicious scent of sun-warmed grass filled the air, mingled with other odors from the nearby woods.

The disgruntled guardian stalked into the open, brow furrowed and eyes on the ground. The four Chaotix looked up from their activities innocently. "So, how did it go?" Espio asked. Knuckles shot him a look like a bullet and said nothing. He paced to the big rock in the corner of the clearing and sat down. It was quiet for a moment, only the chirping of the birds overhead breaking the silence. Then Vector said dreamily, "Anybody seen any seals lately?" He cringed and grinned at the others, for although his back was to Knuckles, he sensed the fierce intensity of his stare.

"Were you guys eavesdropping again?" came the soft snarl.

"No," the green crocodile replied, still without turning to look at the echidna. "A little bee told me."

"Charmy, I'm gonna swat you!" Knuckles lunged at the bee, fists doubled, but Charmy revved his engines and shot above the treetops where he hovered, safe, giggling nervously.

Knuckles stormed back to the rock and again sat down, glaring at the world, jaw thrust out. Charmy landed on a limb above the clearing and sat, swinging his feet. Vector donned his ever-present headphones and reclined on the grass, beating a rhythm with his fingers. Mighty the armadillo resumed lifting a fifty-pound weight with one arm, and Espio picked up a leaf and concentrated on turning the back of his hand the same color. No one said a word.

After a few minutes of silence, Knuckles said, "Okay, okay, I'll explain."

The four looked up and faced him with great interest.

"Creeps," he breathed. Aloud he said, "The reason Talon is staying here is because of the oath I took when Dad handed the guardianship to me. I promised to defend the Floating Island at all costs."

"Big deal," Espio interrupted, returning to his default shade of hot pink. "We all know your oath by heart."

Knuckles frowned him into silence. "I wasn't done yet, stupid. What I was going to say was, there's a part where it says that if anyone comes to me in the name of my ancestors, bearing the Palace seal, I must shelter them. I never paid much attention to it before; that was something they did a long time ago, and nobody knows about it anymore. Well, almost nobody." He paused and appeared miffed. "Then this kid shows up. Not only does he know how to ask for protection, he ALSO has a replica of the seal stamped into the bottom of his shoe."

"Faked?" Mighty volunteered.

Knuckles shook his head, making his dreadlocks swing. "Nope. It was there when the shoe was made--it has all the same wear on it that the treads do."

"How long will he stay?" Charmy bee asked from his perch in the tree.

"I don't know," replied Knuckles. "As long as he wants to, I guess, and I can't throw him out--legally, I mean."

Two hundred feet south of Chaotix Central, a slight figure sat in the sun by the river, short ears pricked. His hearing was so sensitive he had heard every word, even above the the rush of the water. His face gave no sign of how he felt, but inwardly he was relieved. Knuckles had a sense of honor and would not break his word unless provoked. "At least I'll be okay for a while," Talon thought.

* * *

Knuckles had ways of making the stranger feel unwelcome. One of these was to totally ignore him. Talon's meek, quiet personality made him easy to ignore, but Knuckles could not forget him. Always in the back of his mind was the uneasy knowledge that an unwelcome visitor was on the island.

Talon amused himself by doing unforgettable things.

Knuckles returned to his hut after working all day in Lava Reef, hot and tired. He opened the door and stared in surprise. The hut had been scrubbed from top to bottom, the furniture polished, and a large bouquet of honeysuckle in a jar sat on the table, adding the scent of spring to the air. Talon was noticeably absent. He did not return until late that night, after Knuckles was asleep. The anteater was still asleep when the echidna arose the next morning. Knux stood over him and gazed at him, his eyes showing his bewilderment. Why had he done that? Boredom?

Knuckles never did get around to thanking him. But once a week after that, usually when Knux was gone most of the day, Talon would scrub the hut from top to bottom.

When he was not doing domestic chores, Talon would enter the young forests and wander the island, exploring the trails and seeing the sights. He spent two days poking through Sandopolis, intrigued by the desert ruins. He also discovered Marble Gardens, but so lost himself in their maze he was trapped for three days until Knuckles realized something was wrong and went looking for him. After that (and a good scolding) Talon always carried a compass.

The anteater had only been on the Floating Island a few weeks when Knuckles decided to test his brain and brawn in a subtle fashion.

Parts of the riverbed were reinforced with dikes here and there to prevent flooding in certain areas. One of these dikes burst and a mile of forestland was flooded before Knuckles ran across it. Mending the dike would take several days of hard, muddy labor, and Talon was pressed into service along with the Chaotix.

On the morning of the first day, the five islanders enjoyed bossing the young newcomer about, daring him to lift the heaviest rocks, demanding fallen trees to be hauled to the breach in the dike, and setting him to dig sediment out of the stony riverbottom. Talon obeyed without a word, struggling to lift and haul and dig, pausing furtively to rest whenever he could. By noon when the crew stopped for lunch, his thin body was trembling with exertion. They all watched him as they conversed over their meal, but he simply ate his sandwich in silence and picked mud from his arms and legs.

Talon worked just as hard that afternoon. By now the morning freshness had worn off, and the Chaotix ceased picking on him for a while; the work was too hard. Log must be laid lengthwise through the breach, reinforced with boulders, covered with gravel and layered over with soil. This meant hauling in timber cut during the winter, transporting the boulders and digging up the gravel. The river, of course, had been shut off at the mouth when Knuckles had found the breach.

Work was called off at four o' clock. The crew of six stacked their

tools at the base of a tree and set off along the trail, trudging wearily and not saying much. Knuckles was as tired as the rest of them, but something made him look around for Talon as they walked. The anteater was at the rear of the procession, plodding along with his head hanging. A twinge of pity touched Knuckles's heart. He fought it off immediately by remembering the look in the kid's face when he had claimed sanctuary. He had asked for it--let him take his medicine like a man.

Talon still shared Knuckles's hut, so as soon as they entered he went straight to the couch and flopped down on his back. Knuckles heard him sigh heavily with relief.

A bit later, when Knuckles had thrown together a hasty meal, he checked on Talon and found him fast asleep, limp as a shoestring. The pity returned as Knux stood looking at him, and this time he could not push it away. This stranger had done his share of work today, and his body was simply not used to it. "You won't be able to move tomorrow," Knuckles said softly to the sleeping anteater as he removed his muddy shoes. "But you'd better get used to it or get razzed unmercifully." He covered him with a blanket and went to bed, himself.

Indeed, the next morning, Talon was so sore he could barely climb off the sofa. Knuckles was wolfing a bowl of granola as Talon eased himself into his chair at the table.

"Stiff?" Knux asked unnecessarily.

Talon nodded wearily. "Yes sir."

"You want something to eat?"

"Yes sir. I'm very hungry." He started to stand, but Knuckles waved him back. "Stay put. I'll get it."

Talon sank back gratefully as Knuckles assembled a very large bowl of cereal. Offhandedly Knux asked, "Tal, you want milk or juice with that?"

Talon started visibly, but only said, "Juice, thank you."

Knuckles brought it to him. "Okay if I call you Tal?"

"Uh ... yes sir, if you wish." He appeared faintly startled. He appeared even more so when Knuckles said, "Let me see your hands."

Talon offered them and Knuckles glanced at his palms. "Ah, thought so. You blistered all the hide off your hands with the shovel yesterday. Want some gloves?"

Yes sir," Talon replied, ducking his head shyly. "They do hurt awfully bad. Yesterday--" He stopped, apparently afraid of talking too much, but Knux resumed his seat and said, "Go on."

"Yesterday I thought I would have to quit," Talon said, looking at a raw palm. He began eating, obviously reluctant to talk anymore.

"I know how it is," Knuckles replied conversationally. "When your

hands sweat and the salt gets into your blisters--it's awful. I've got some gloves you can borrow."

Talon looked up at him, almost afraid to lift his eyes. "Thank you very much, sir."

"And another thing," Knuckles said with his mouth full, "knock it off with the 'sir'. I've never been called 'sir' in my life. Call me 'Knuckles' or 'Knux', okay?"

"Yes sir--I mean Knuckles." For the first time in his visit, Talon smiled. "And you can call me Tal."

That morning, when the gang gathered at the dike, full of ginger and optimism, Talon was mocked for being the only one with leather gloves. Knuckles pretended not to notice until Talon began to pull into himself before the onslaught. Then the echidna walked up behind the Chaotix and slapped them all upside the head. "Knock it off," he said simply when they turned and stared at him. "We've got enough work to do without demoralizing the labor force." The Chaotix looked at one another in surprise as Knuckles walked away. Behind them, Talon's grin met behind his head.

All that day, whenever anyone poked fun at Talon, Knuckles jumped all over them. As a result, the anteater worked as much as the rest of them and was allowed to rest whenever he needed to. The Chaotix didn't know what to make of this and grumbled to one another that Knuckles was going soft. But if he offended his friends, it was because Knuckles had just added another to his tally. That evening when they headed home, Talon and Knuckles walked side by side.

From that day forward Knuckles took Talon everywhere with him, whether the Chaotix liked it or not. Espio observed glumly, "Sonic has Tails. Now Knuckles has Tal."

Even with this infant friendship, Talon would say nothing of why he wanted to stay on the island or where he had come from. When Knuckles asked him where his parents were, Talon dropped his eyes and said simply, "They're dead." He did not elaborate and Knuckles didn't press him. But Knuckles had learned a few things along the way; just because he liked someone didn't mean he should trust them completely. If he didn't have their complete confidence, he would not give them his. He left Hidden Palace out of the grand tour he took Talon on, along with the secret library in Sandopolis. He neglected to show him how to work the teleporters, and responded vaguely to the question of what kept the island afloat.

One of the places Knuckles DID show Talon was a deep ravine the river flowed through to reach the lowlands. It was a gouge in a gentle mountainside, the walls earthy brown and red. The river raged and thundered through the bottom among the black rocks, keeping their surfaces so polished only a little moss could grow along the walls. "It's deep," the crimson echidna informed his companion. "You fall down there and you're a goner."

Talon gazed down at the roaring rapids for a moment, engraving them into his memory. Experimentally he picked up a stone and tossed it in. It disappeared into the whitewater without so much as a splash. He looked up at Knuckles. "Has anyone ever fallen in?"

"No, not that I know of. C'mon, let's go back to Chaotix Central."

The two strolled away down the hill.

Chapter 3: Trouble Brewing

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One day Knuckles called into Knothole to see if his services were needed. He did this every two weeks. If he was needed (as he had been quite often while Robotropolis had been in operation), he would leave the island in the Chaotix's care and go to the mainland via teleporter. But things were slow in Knothole. The biggest news Sally had for him was that Slasher had been sick a few days earlier, and the village was working with a demolition team to clear away the rubble of Robotropolis. "And Sonic wanted to know if you'd care if he came out to the island. He--er--get retired from work for a week."

"Sure," Knuckles replied, "send him on out."

It was the worst suggestion that had been made in a long time.

The blue hedgehog arrived that afternoon. He was introduced to Talon, greeted the Chaotix, and promptly hightailed it off to look at things. Knuckles, of course, went with him.

It was a chance remark Sonic made. He first did some ridiculous high-speed stunts and ran several miles in a handful of seconds. When he was sufficiently tired and ready to walk, Knuckles asked, "So why did you get retired for a week?"

Sonic waved a hand. "Oh, I got impatient."

"That's all?"

"Well ..." the hedgehog smirked and looked away. "You might say I used a jackhammer as hyper."

"You're kidding."

"Oh, I only tore up a couple tractors and half a mile of pavement. Nobody was hurt. Much," he added as an afterthought.

Knuckles chuckled and changed the subject. "Robotnik been around?"

Sonic shook his head. "Nope. We haven't seen hide nor hair of him in months. He won't want the pile of junk Robotropolis is now. He'll want something he can steal--buildings, resources." Sonic looked around at the trees. "Like the Floating Island."

"Oh, I'm real sure you'd sell me out," Knuckles laughed. "He's been here before. He doesn't dare show his mustache around here for fear of me taking revenge."

"Still," Sonic said mischievously, "You never know ... ah, I'm sure."

I wouldn't do that to my worst enemy."

Little did Sonic know it, but he had touched a nerve. One of Knuckles's deepest fears was that Robotnik would return and attempt to steal the super and Master emeralds from him. After all, the doctor DID know the location of Hidden Palace ...

This is why what followed did so.

That evening as the six inhabitants of the island and Sonic prepared for dinner, Sonic told them that he had been rather tired lately from his prolonged work on the city cleanup, and had a tendency to forget things; for instance, he might wander off and return a few minutes later, expecting to have been missed. "Don't pay attention to me," he told his companions. "It's not serious."

Only a little while after this he did exactly what he said he would--got up and left, was gone a few minutes and returned. "Hi, miss me?" he asked as he sat down. "I was cruisin'. Did I miss the chow?" The Chaotix, Knux and Talon looked at each other. It was a good thing he had warned them. As a result, they pretended not to notice. But Talon stared long and hard at his face for the duration of the meal.

The following morning, Sonic began doing strange things.

He would suddenly remark that the Floating Island would make an excellent bargaining tool if Robotnik ever returned. When Knuckles would question him, he would only look smug and say, "I can say whatever I want to protect Knothole." Then a moment later, Sonic would appear to forget everything he had said. It began to get on Knuckles's nerves, so he began avoiding him.

Talon was happily digging a hole in a creek bank, pretending it was a giant cave. He enjoyed playing by himself, giving testimony to his age; it was one of the few times he acted closer to 12 than 20. He was thus occupied when his sensitive ears caught the sound of thumping feet. He stood up, his head on level with the top of the bank, and looked about. He spotted Sonic, who was running across the meadow fifty feet away, red sneakers a blur. As Sonic drew opposite him, he threw up a hand and yelled, "Hiya, Konya!"

Talon stared until the hedgehog vanished into the trees on the left. Konya? Where had Sonic heard his real name?

The Chaotix Sonic alternately buddied around with and ignored. It was as if he were two different people.

Everyone, for some reason or another, was glad to see Sonic go a week later. But as they trooped to Chaotix Central from seeing him off, they stopped, aghast--there on the grass reclined the blue one himself. He looked up innocently and said, "Where you slo-mo's been? I decided to stick around for another week or so."

Knuckles looked at the Chaotix and Talon, and they all groaned inwardly.

This was not the Sonic they were used to, either. This Sonic was more like Spike had been when he arrived in Knothole. Obnoxious, rude and mean, it soon got to where the islanders couldn't stand the sight of

him.

The hedgehog seemed obsessed with Robotnik's threatened presence and tormented Knuckles whenever he could. At first Knuckles just shrugged it off. But bit by bit it began to get to him. The issue of the island's safety was near and dear to his heart, and Sonic would not cease twisting the knife. Slowly he began to hate the very sight of the hedgehog.

This continued for a fortnight. The Chaotix and Talon could only stand by and watch as Knuckles retreated deeper and deeper into himself, brooding. Each encounter with Sonic made it that much worse. Knuckles went from being cheerful and good-natured to sullen and silent, eyes peering watchfully from beneath his lowered brows. One got the feeling that when his rage erupted it would make Pompeii look like a hiccup. And yet Sonic would not stop his antics.

The last straw came unexpectedly one cold, gray day--April haunting June with dreary weather and chilling wind. The island hunched it's back and bowed it's head, and all colors seemed dull and gray. Knuckles stayed indoors with his friends and played board games. Sonic was outside somewhere, and the respite was appreciated. Knuckles came out of his shell somewhat and challenged everyone to Floating Island Monopoly. The rules were the same, but the real estate squares were the different island locations.

Two hours later, everyone but Espio and Talon were rich, as they had been the ones unlucky enough to land on Hidden Palace.

"I've mortgaged everything I own!" the chameleon groaned as he handed Knuckles \$2000 in rent. "Donations for the poor, anyone?"

Talon was nearly broke after landing on chance and having to pay everyone \$50 on top of his fatal roll.

"The only way you'll survive now," Vector said to the two losers, "is to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars."

"I doubt it," Espio replied, eyeing the game board as if it were a minefield.

"Hey," Charmy bee offered, "I'll buy Marble Gardens from Talon for half price."

Talon carefully looked over his mortgaged title deeds, weighing the monopoly he had on them against the need for cash. "No," he said at last, "but I'll trade you the waterworks for the Reading Railroad."

The barter was interrupted by a knock on the door. The six looked at each other in dismay. "I'll go see what he wants," Knuckles said, getting up with the air of one who is going to be whipped.

He opened the door and stepped out, closing it behind him. Sonic stood there, eyes direct and staring, rather unlike himself, spines ruffled by the wind. Knuckles folded his arms and looked at him coldly. "What?"

"Knux, Robotnik's around again."

"Did you ever heard about the boy who cried wolf?" Knuckles returned. His face was dark, his hands clenched tightly.

Sonic didn't seem to notice. "We need you to come to Knothole. We're afraid something's major wrong. We could--"

"What do you mean 'we'?"

The echidna's frigid attitude registered with the hedgehog. He looked at Knuckles, puzzled. "We. Us. You and me, Knux. Hey, what's up with you?"

The stress of the past two weeks and terror for his island collided in a volatile mixture--Knux exploded. "You've tormented me for weeks about it, you creep! Get out of here! I don't want to hear about your stupid problems! Get off my island!" He leaped at the bewildered hedgehog, grabbed him by one arm and dragged him off toward the teleporter that was aimed for Knothole.

"Knux, wait a minute!" Sonic pled, trying to get his feet under him, but not fighting. He was too shocked to fight. "What the heck are you doing, man? Why are you so mad?"

"Because you're gonna betray me, or have already," the guardian replied through clenched teeth. He was so angry his face was nearly unrecognizable.

Sonic stared at him, openmouthed. "Wha--I didn't do that! I would never do that! If I did anything else, I'm sorry!"

"Sorry don't cut the mustard," Knuckles snarled. He rounded a bend in the trail, and there was the blue crystal lens on the round glass disk. He threw Sonic down on it and stepped on with him.

Sonic looked up at him as the teleporter warmed up, not even trying to stand. "Knuckles, what happened? What did I do?"

Knuckles looked down with a sneer. "You aren't gonna sell me out, jerk. You ain't welcome here no more." Sonic's flabbergasted reply was cut off by the teleporter beam whisking them away.

They beamed down a little way outside of the Freedom Fighter village. Knuckles again grabbed Sonic's arm, pulled him up and yanked him toward the village. Neither said a word. Sonic's eyes were wide with horrified grief. What had happened to his friend? This was like a totally different Knuckles, like when they first met.

They strode into Knothole. Sally saw them and approached, but her greeting died on her lips as Knuckles threw Sonic as hard as he could. Sonic landed on his side, rolled almost to Sally's feet and scrambled to his feet beside her.

"And don't come back," Knuckles snarled at him, teeth bared. "None of you scum are welcome on the Floating Island any more. I'm quitting the Freedom Fighters. I don't care what happens to you, don't come crawling to me."

He returned to the island with the portable teleporter (which had been his link to Knothole) under one arm. He had no desire to see any of his former friends again, ever, Sonic least of all. If they wanted

to see him, they could come out to the island by whatever means they could.

As he stormed away toward the island's interior, a pair of eyes watched him from the shelter of the trees. A voice laughed softly--a sound like tearing cardboard. "You finally turned on him," it said maliciously. "It took you long enough. Now there will be no one to save you."

Chapter 4:
Kardot

=====

It was another ten days before anything suspicious happened.

During that time the cold front drifted away and temperatures rose once again. The sun regained its warmth, glowing down on the Floating Island from its place in the hot blue sky. Flowers bloomed, trees leafed out, and everywhere grass rose like a brilliant green carpet.

Knuckles wandered the island, largely alone.

His anger, once provoked, did not subside easily. He was still stewing over Sonic's actions, and wondering vaguely whether or not he should have cut himself off from the Freedom Fighters. After all, Metal Sonic, Robo Knux and Robotnik were still out there somewhere. Maybe Sonic's plea had been legitimate ... no, he wouldn't even consider that.

That brought him back to Talon. Knuckles still knew next to nothing about him; for all he knew, the kid was a spy, knowledge of ancient customs notwithstanding. He could even be a robot, like Packbell--an android. Maybe. Knuckles didn't lean very heavily in that direction; he was pretty sure Tal was not a robot. He could, however, very well be a spy. But what about those cuts on his back he had had when he arrived? A spy wouldn't be wounded, would he?

Questions, questions and no answers. Nothing shut Talon up faster than asking questions.

On the aforementioned tenth day after Knuckles's estrangement from Sonic, another stranger appeared on the island.

The guardian was hiking through the acres of replanted forest on the west side of the island that morning, examining the growth of the trees. There were only a few withered ones here and there; not enough water, probably. He had lost fewer than he had thought he would. He paused under one of the other trees that had made it through the terbium blight--a towering oak. Funny, all the trees that had survived had been hardwoods.

As he stood there with one hand on the scaly trunk, gazing up at the shifting leaves thoughtfully, a voice spoke behind him.

"Excuse me--"

He whipped around, startled. A girl, the same height as he. He had

never seen her before. "Who are you?" he barked automatically, even as his brain caught up enough with him to take in details.

Her fur was dark umber--almost black. It shown in the sun like polished silk, highlighting the curves of the muscles in her arms and legs. A narrow orange stripe traced down her forehead to the tip of her pointed muzzle. Her soft forelock was this color, curved like a wave over one eye. Her hair was just below shoulder length, fine and glossy as her fur, and stirred and blew with a life of its own when she moved. Her slanted eyes were a strange color--a light olive green, giving her an oddly cat-like appearance, but accenting her looks. She wore a light blue tanktop and shorts that came to her knees. She wore faded white sneakers, and her small, delicate-looking hands were sharply clawed. She was an anteater like Talon, and a beautiful one at that.

She looked him straight in the face and said, "I am Kardot."

It was so much like the way Talon had introduced himself Knuckles was shocked. He continued questioning her nevertheless. "What are you doing here? I don't like strangers who drop in uninvited.." His voice was weaker than he would have liked--her fashion-model looks were turning his heart and brain inside out the longer he looked at her.

"I am sorry," she said in a rich, cultured voice, as if she spoke several languages. "I began looking for you as soon as I arrived. I am looking for a boy named Konya. He is my brother. Have you seen him?"

"I haven't met anyone by that name," Knuckles replied carefully, but he had a feeling he knew who she meant. He wished he didn't have to grill her--it seemed an insult to her beauty.

"He goes by the nickname Talon," Kardot said, a trifle condescendingly. "He is rather paranoid about his identity."

It was on the tip of Knuckles's tongue to reply that he knew Talon, but something stopped him. Some protective guardian instinct, perhaps. Maybe it would be best if he didn't mention him to her ... at least not yet. "I may know someone who knows this Konya," he said guardedly. "I'll ask if they know him and come back."

She nodded and clasped her clawed hands in front of her. Her face was expressionless, but her green eyes flashed--excitement--anticipation, maybe? "I will wait here," she agreed.

Knuckles turned and began to walk back the way he had come. It would not do to let a stranger see the direction of his home and Talon. As soon as he was out of her range of vision, he turned left and began to run through the saplings. "I'm such an idiot," he told himself. "She knows Tal is here or she wouldn't have asked." For some reason it didn't seem that important. He had never seen anyone as handsome as she. Sally was pretty and Serena was cute, but this girl was drop-dead gorgeous. She was even more so in his imagination, now that she was out of sight. Kardot ... what a funny name. K, like Konya. Konya was a funny name, too, almost feminine. Maybe that was why he preferred his nickname.

By this time Knuckles had left the young woods behind and was jogging

up the path that led to his hut's back door. Talon had been there when he left earlier that morning.

Sure enough, when he opened the door and strode in, there was the black-and-gray anteater curled up on the sofa, reading an old, faded hardback. He looked up complacently. "Hello sir." Knuckles had long ceased to protest the 'sir' and now ignored it.

Talon sat up, and Knuckles sat down. "Tal," the echidna began, "is your real name Konya?"

Talon's eyes widened slightly, and his face took on the look of a criminal who finds out the police have his number. "Yes," he said tonelessly. "Konya Mori. Who told you?"

"I met a stranger this morning--"

"Was it Kit or Kardot?"

Knuckles blinked. Talon was sharp today. "Kardot."

"Was Kit with her?"

"I didn't--no, she was alone. What's Kit look like?"

"He's white with a black stripe over his eyes. They're both freaks." Talon spoke flatly, his voice devoid of emotion.

Knuckles said warily, "She said she was your sister."

"She's my cousin."

A light came on. "The one you're hiding from?"

Talon did not answer for a moment, toying idly with the book in his hands. At last he faced Knuckles squarely. "I am still under your protection. Don't tell Kardot I'm here. Make her and Kit leave immediately. Trust me, sir. They are nothing but bad news. I should not have come here--" he broke off and stared at his shoes.

Knuckles gazed at him. He could see it now: an orphan who runs away from the relatives who offered to take him in. The runaway seeks refuge on an isolated island and lives in terror of his family coming for him. "But what about the whipcuts?" his mind protested in the background. It was the one thing he could not explain--yet. Maybe he could find out a bit from Kardot.

Aloud he said, "I'll show Kardot off the island, and Kit, too, if he's here. And I won't let them know you're here."

Talon looked at him with gratitude and murmured, "Thank you ever so much, sir."

* * *

An hour later found Knuckles and Kardot walking through the woods together, talking. He had told her that Talon had left the island a week ago. She accepted this without a question, but appeared crestfallen. "Poor child," she murmured. "He truly believes we intend

to kill him. I think he received that impression when one of my employees mistook him for a thief and whipped him. He ran away shortly afterward." She turned her greeny-brown eyes on Knuckles, and he felt his heart flutter for no obvious reason. "Did he appear--quite sane--to you?"

"Of course," Knuckles replied, trying to act nonchalant. He flipped his dreadlocks over his shoulders and threw out his chest, hoping she would notice. If she did she gave no sign of it.

Kardot changed the subject abruptly. "What resources does the Floating Island contain?" she asked, brushing a clawed hand through her forelock. If anyone else had asked that question, Knuckles would have been on his guard at once. But because an attractive female asked it, he didn't give it a second thought.

"The natural resources--trees and stuff--were mostly killed off by a ... a disease that came through last fall. I take my water from a desalination plant beneath the ocean, and there's tons and tons of mineral deposits in Lava Reef."

"Like what?" Kardot asked, turning her eyes on him in something like adoration.

The eager guardian launched into a list of all the ore and crystal left behind by the lava. It went on for quite some time.

As he talked, they struck a path that lead up toward the nearby mountains. Knuckles didn't realize that Kardot was guiding them very gently, and he didn't care. He was holding her interest, and he didn't give a hang about the rest of the world.

Chapter 5: Talon's True Colors

=====

Talon restlessly closed his book and walked to a window. He couldn't sit here any longer. News of his cousins' arrival had unnerved him. Kit and Kardot were out there somewhere, looking for him and the secret he carried.

He went from window to window, his motions quick and fidgety. There was no one within sight of the hut. Maybe they had not yet scouted out the island.

He opened the back door and stepped outside, eyes darting this way and that. Birds chirped in the trees nearby, the friendly breeze touched his face and arms, and the noonday sun shone warmly on his head. There were no other people nearby; his ears told him so. The Chaotix were all in Chaotix Central, listening to a new tape of Vector's; he could hear the thumping of the subwoofer. Knuckles was off with Kardot. That left Kit somewhere on the island, alone ...

Talon slunk across the open strip that faced the rear of the hut and ducked into a stand of young birch trees. He was afraid. He must find Knuckles. If the echidna were still with Kardot then Talon would trail them, but he must be within sight of Knuckles to feel safe.

He crept from grove to grove, constantly looking about him, jumping at every sound. His furry body was soaked in a nervous sweat that chilled when the breeze touched it. Kit could move as softly as a ghost, and often you wouldn't see him until he pounced on you ...

The anteater climbed a hill for a look about him. Knux had not said where he had met Kardot, but he had departed in a westerly direction. Talon paused for breath and thought hard, gazing at the green landscape about him. Ten to one she was still here ... he had seen the puppy-look in Knuckles's eyes. She had turned on the charm and he was hooked. Talon felt an icy hand of fear squeeze his heart--no, please, not her, Knux ...

The next hill ahead was higher and crowned with dead trees. He made for it at a trot, plunging down one hillside and struggling up the next. Maybe he would have a better view of things from up there.

The grass at the top of the hill was a foot and a half high, two feet in some places. Talon waded through it, puffing from his climb. He could see the ocean in the distance; far below and indigo blue, with the sun sparkling on it--

On foot went down and he stumbled into a shallow pit, hidden by the grass. It was perhaps three feet deep, but the grass in it had grown so tall it was even with the other, shorter grass. Talon, on his hands and knees, was completely hidden from sight, enclosed in a curtain of green.

"This must be a terbium pit," he thought as he regained his feet. "Knux told me about them--" he started forward, caught his toe on something and fell again. What was it this time--a tree branch? He felt under the grass he had trampled, expecting to feel the hard, prickly form of a limb. Instead, his fingers encountered warm fur.

He jerked his hand away as if burned. Fur? What the heck was in this pit with him? Hesitantly, ready to jump back if something attacked him, he put out a clawed hand and pulled away the grass.

A foot with a shoe on it.

Talon stared at it in cold horror. Then, sickly curious, he parted the grass, eyes following it up. The foot was attached to a leg, the leg to a body--white fur--a dark green vest--

"K-Kit?" he whispered. The anteater did not move. Talon climbed through the grass, alarmed, driven by some impulse to help. His cousin's eyes were closed, and he was lying on his belly.

Talon tried to roll him over, but the body was too heavy for him to lift. His fingers touched something sticky. He looked down. A dark crimson liquid stained his fingertips and claws. Horrified, he wiped it off on the grass beneath him. Where had it come from?

This time he succeeded in heaving Kit onto his side. His eyes shot to the red patch on the white chest. The wound was small and narrow, but

only a little blood had leaked out. A knife wound in the heart. The implication of this hit him like an express train; Kit was dead.

Talon shot out of the hole and tore down the hillside in a blind panic. The only thought in his head was to put as much distance as possible between himself and that silent shape lying in the grassy pit.

He did not stop until his adrenaline gave out and he began to gasp for breath. He halted in a thicket of volunteer ash trees and sat down, holding his side. Kit was dead! Dead and hidden, no less! Who had done it? Of course he knew. She was a knife fighter like no other--sword fighter, too. But if she had murdered her own twin brother, what might she do to Knuckles?

A knife-thrust of horror stabbed through Talon's thin chest. He leaped to his feet, struck dumb with the thought--Knux was too tough to submit to being stabbed to death. So she might very well--

The ravine, black rocks like teeth, the river foaming angrily below. Forgetting he was winded, Talon broke out of the thicket and ran like a thing possessed.

* * *

The open area along the top of the cliffs was devoid of life when Talon topped the last rise. He stopped and stooped, hands on his knees, nearly wheezing for breath. His eyes flicked here and there as he rested. No one on the path, no one visible in the trees. His guess may have been wrong--how he hoped he was wrong-- After a few minutes the roaring in his ears subsided and he was able to listen. No voices, no footsteps, no sign of life. The river roared ominously in the dark ravine to his left, the trees whispered on his right.

Muscles trembling in fatigue, Talon wobbled to the edge of the ravine and looked in. Only wet rocks, emerald-green moss and foamy water. No red body anywhere. Of course, if Kardot had pushed him the river would have swallowed him up ... Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, "Knux! Knux!" His voice came out as a squeak. "I'm not brave enough to face this," he thought. "Kit was enough." He felt his stomach tighten at the memory of the corpse. What if Knuckles was ... like that? He gulped and began to walk along the edge of the ravine, looking in and calling. He hoped ... prayed ... that Knux was not down there, that he had been wrong about his cousin ...

Suddenly a voice floated up from below. "Hey! Hey, who is that?" Knuckles's voice.

Talon had to take several deep breaths before he could reply, "Talon."

"Tal! Be careful, man! Is SHE still up there?"

The young anteater turned and stared about him. He was alone, or was as far as his senses could reach. "No," he called down. "She's gone."

"Good. She pushed me. Can you toss me a rope or something?"

Talon crouched on the lip of the cliff and looked over. Where WAS Knuckles? He could hear him, but not see him. "Where are you, sir?"

"On a little ledge about halfway down," the reply drifted up. "The cliff hangs out and I just can't climb it."

The anteater sat back on his heels and looked about him helplessly. There were no tree branches that long. He could run back to the hut and get some rope, but it was a long way, and there was always the chance of meeting Kardot ... Well, there was only one option left. The thought tied his stomach in a wrenching knot of fear, but there was nothing for it.

Slowly he stood erect, pressed his feet together and said, "Chaos activated," in the ancient echidna tongue. Immediately the red and green soles of his shoes lit up like floodlights. He shot two feet off the ground and hovered. Talon remained perfectly still for a few seconds, arms out for balance, getting ahold of himself. His last flight with the Emerald Boots had frightened him so badly he had nearly lost his nerve. But one thing forced him to swallow his feelings and use the boots--Knuckles needed him.

Carefully he bent his knees and moved as though to step forward. The boots rocketed him forward smoothly, slowing when he wanted them to. It was so easy; he had forgotten. Waxing bold, he stepped off the cliff and let himself sink down.

Knuckles was standing on a narrow slip of a ledge with his knuclaws dug into the cliff face. The granite directly above him bulged out in an overhang, and to the right and left the stone was brittle and crumbly. Talon could see clawmarks where Knuckles had tried time and again to climb up and had slid back. The echidna turned his red head, saw Talon, turned back, then jerked his eyes to the anteater again in disbelief. "Tal?" he exclaimed, "what in the world ...?"

"This is how I got to the Floating Island," said Talon with a forced smile. He swooped forward, wrapped his arms around Knuckles's chest under his arms. locked his hands and grunted, "Let go."

Knuckles hesitated one second, casting a glance at the rapids below and wondering if they would plunge straight down, then detached his knuclaws from the rock. Talon's boot caught them and lifted them upward, smoothly as an elevator.

A short moment later they landed on the top of the cliffs. Talon, still hovering a few inches off the ground, flexed his arms and rubbed his shoulders. "You're heavy."

Knuckles drew a breath and let it out slowly. "I thought for sure you were gonna drop me." He rubbed his chest. "Thanks, though."

"Did Kardot try to stab you?"

"No, she only shoved me off the edge when I wasn't looking. Luckily I fell in my glide position and was able to grab the wall. I picked a rather rotten spot ..." Knuckles paused and gazed at Talon with a mixture of respect and amazement. "Why would she try to stab me, and why didn't you tell me you could fly?"

The young anteater poured out his story of finding the murder victim on the hilltop and of how it had frightened him in reply to the first question. For the second, he said, "My dad gave me these when I was little. The soles are carved out of the same stuff as the red and green super emeralds." He gave a little spin for emphasis.

By the time he had finished, Knuckles had decided two things; something needed to be done about Kardot AT ONCE, and this was not the Talon he had grown used to. The word 'sir' was not spoken once, and Talon's entire personality appeared to have changed. No longer calm and stand-offish, his eyes were alive with changing emotion. He was always moving--his boots held him high enough off the ground to bounce, twirl, jog and dance, which he did constantly.

Once he had finished his tale of woe, Talon seemed to think of something. He swooped forward and grabbed Knuckles by the hand. "Please Knux, hurry. It just dawned on me--if she tried to kill you, then the Chaotix are next!"

Chapter 6: Surprises

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Talon had deactivated his shoes and was trotting alongside Knuckles. The two were making for Chaotix Central by cutting straight across the island. Knuckles's face was set like stone, eyes clouded with worry. Distracted as he was, he didn't notice his companion was beginning to tire until Talon lagged behind noticeably. Then he glanced around and slowed. He offered a rough paw to the youngster, who took it gratefully. "Sorry," the echidna said, his face softening. "I was just thinking. Do you mind telling me about Kardot so I know what to expect?"

Talon gave him a clear, direct look and said, "I'll have to tell you a lot more than just her part. Do you mind?"

"Heck no! We've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Well," Talon began, eyes taking on a faraway look, "it really started with my mother and father. Dad collected--well, you know the Seven Island Warriors?"

"Sure. The Seven highly-trained warriors who defended the Floating Island. They were disbanded right after the Palace was hidden."

"Right. Well, their armor is scattered across the world. My dad collected it most of his life. He finally got all the parts to form one entire suit of armor. He and mom never used it, but they let me play with it all the time when I was little. When I was about five Dad gave me the shoes to keep. He taught me the password, and I've had them ever since. They automatically resize themselves to fit any sized foot, you see.

"Anyway, my cousins--Kit and Kardot--have always sort of been crazy. They tried and tried to find a chaos emerald or two, but failed. You'd never believe they were twins--Kit is almost an albino, and

Kardot is nearly black. There's almost no such thing as a white or black anteater, but there they are. Anyhow, they got wind of Dad's collection and tried to buy it, then tried to steal it. When both attempts failed, they set the house on fire, then snuck out with the armor during the uproar. That's what happened to my parents." His voice was soft, and instead of grief, there was only a quiet sort of hatred in his voice.

"Gosh," Knuckles said, and could think of nothing else to add.

"Yeah," Talon said, running his claws through his hair. "Anyway, Kit and Kardot tried out the armor and got to where they could use it pretty well, but they were missing the shoes."

"That's where you come in?" Knuckles volunteered.

Tal nodded. "Uh-huh. Another thing you don't know about me is that I've been an actor for several years. That's how I was able to fake you out for so long. I was able to keep you guessing. I was off on a film shoot the night of the fire, and of course I had my boots with me. I was sent to live with my uncle, and that's how I learned who had set the fire and why. When my cousins realized I had the boots, they tried to take 'em from me. When I fought 'em, Kit got out his bullwhip and chased me with it. I took off into a thunderstorm. I was trying to get to North Mobius, where I figured they'd never find me, but instead I wound up on the Floating Island; the place here my shoes had been made. So I decided to stick around. Dad was always a huge Floating Island history buff, so I knew how to ask you for protection. I also knew all about the seal replica in the bottom of my shoe, too.

"But then Kardot shows up, and what's more, she killed Kit. She must mean business this time." Talon lapsed into silence, eyes fixed on the ground. They walked along without speaking for a moment.

Knuckles was pondering the story. "Well," he said at last, "she wasn't wearing any armor when I was with her. She must have left it behind."

"No," Talon said shortly, "she has it."

"How do you know?"

"Sonic was acting weird, right?"

Knuckles stopped walking and stared at him. "What are you saying?"

Talon, eyes still on the ground, shrugged.

"You mean that wasn't Sonic I threw off the island?"

"No, that one was. The armor can shapeshift."

The echidna's eyes slowly filled with horror. "Oh man--" he whirled and pelted as hard as he could toward Chaotix Central. Talon fired up his boots and raced after him.

* * *

Chaotix Central was audible from half a mile away, first as an air-vibrating boom, boom, then a hissing of vocalists, then finally electric guitars and saxophones. Knuckles jumped into the open and stood, gasping, eyes sweeping the scene. Vector's boom-box was turned all the way up, and the four Chaotix were dancing and whooping to the music. Nothing new there. His gaze settled on the big rock that was his own private throne. An icy chill raced through his body. Sitting on that rock was HIMSELF!!

"YOU!" he thundered.

The Chaotix heard him and looked up. As one, their jaws dropped open in shock. Eyes flicked from one Knuckles, to the other, and back again. The other Knuckles slid off the boulder and stood facing the real one.

Vector switched off the music, and silence settled over the scene like audible shadows when a light is put out.

Kardot, disguised as Knuckles, said coolly, "Who ARE you?" Her voice was exactly like his.

"You know who I am," Knuckles snarled. He could see the Chaotix were unharmed, and his fear for them had been replaced by outrage that she would take HIS form as a disguise. He started forward, but Mighty barred his path. "Hold it, stranger."

"Move it, Mighty," Knuckles replied evenly. "She's got you tricked. I'm the real one."

"As if!" the imposter said, folding her arms and shifting her weight to one foot in Knuckles-like fashion. "Get real, creep. Guys, get him!"

The Chaotix hesitated, still looking back and forth, searching in vain for some subtle difference between them. The only obvious thing they could see was that one was raging mad and the other was as cool as a cucumber.

"Drop the disguise," the real Knuckles growled, struggling to control himself. "I know who you are, Kardot. Talon told me."

A grave mistake. The imposter punched a fist into the air and shouted, "HA! I knew he was still here! Talon, you're dead meat!"

Knuckles glanced to his left and was horrified to see the anteater in questions step into the open, looking about. Kardot broke into a run with a yell.

"Get her!" Knuckles shouted.

Instead, the Chaotix numbly moved aside for her to pass.

"You idiots!" he yelled in fury. He sprang to block his enemy's onrush. She tackled him without a second thought and they went down.

It was a strange fight. Knuckles was grappling with HIMSELF, all the way down to the dreadlocks and spike-studded fists. "Run Tal, run!" he cried. To the Chaotix he hollered, "Grab her, you morons, before she kills me!" Grimly the Chaotix obeyed.

Knuckles was dealt a blow to the right eye that stunned him. When his dizzy senses righted themselves, he found himself held in a bear hug by Mighty. Kardot was a few feet away, held down by Vector, Espio and Charmy. She appeared furious.

"That's enough!" Vector reprimanded them both with a snap. "There's got to be a way to tell which one is the real Knux."

"Nothing confidential," Knuckles panted. "No 'location of Hidden Palace' things. I don't want her to know."

"Yeah," Kardot replied. "I ain't tellin' YOU where the Master Emerald is."

"Shut up!" Knuckles snarled in indignation. She was mocking him with his own behavior.

She shot him an exact duplicate of his own glare and retorted, "Shut up yourself!"

"Quiet, both of you!" Mighty roared in Knuckles's ear. "Vec, one of them is a really good actor."

Suddenly a soft voice from the rim of the forest said, "Have them recite the Guardian's Oath."

Everyone looked around to see Talon standing there.

"Give us a break, kid," Espio said.

"No, seriously," Talon replied, casually leaning against a tree trunk. "One of them--the real one--will know it." He aimed his words somewhere between the two. "Knux, it was MY dad who was the history buff, not hers. She knows a few things, but she hates history and everything that goes with it."

Charmy, seeing the sense in this, said for all of them, "Okay Knux, whichever you are, say it."

Knuckles obediently said, "I, Knuckles Echidna, hereby swear to protect the Floating Island, the Master Emerald and all else belonging to these. I will pledge my life to the protection of--"

Here two things happened at once. Mighty released Knuckles, and Kardot dropped her disguise.

Her Knuckles-red faded like smoke to be replaced by her own dark fur, and blue and green armor. She wore everything but a helmet--a sliver chain-mail shirt, a sparkling blue belt around her slim waist with what appeared to be a sword sheath hanging from it, an ornately carved breastplate, green and set with some blue stone in the shape of the Palace Seal; a short green skirt called a girdle, and shinguards from ankle to knee. The only thing missing were the blue boots on Talon's feet. Her own white sneakers contrasted sharply with

the outfit.

Kardot backhanded Vector in the mouth, knocking him backward, kicked Espio viciously in the stomach and swatted Charmy across the clearing. Now freed, she leaped to her feet. A bright yellow sword appeared in her hand, drawn from the sheath at her side. Without a sound and with murder in her eyes, she leaped straight at Knuckles, swinging as she came.

There was no way he could have dodged the blow in time. All he could do was stand like a bump on a log, paralyzed, watching the razor edge cut through the air on a course with his neck--

From out of nowhere a tree branch appeared and intercepted the blow. The blade bit into it savagely, splintering the dry wood. It surely would have beheaded its victim had it made contact. The limb was knocked aside, and the echidna saw that Talon had blocked the blade and was flung to the ground from the impact.

Kardot did not stick around for another try. She dodged past Knuckles and fled into the trees, sheathing her sword as she went.

"Tal!" Knuckles exclaimed, rushing to him and helping him up. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," the youngster replied, shaking his hands to clear the shock. "She hit hard."

"Gee Knux," Mighty said, "I'm sorry. I punched you in the eye-- I thought you were the fake."

"Enough about me," the echidna said abruptly. "Kardot's getting away. C'mon, let's get her!"

The chase proved futile; the black-hearted anteater had disappeared without a trace. "She's still here, though," Knuckles remarked as they trudged back to Chaotix Central. "She wants Talon."

* * *

A few more hours passed. Knuckles sat his friends down and relayed to them everything Talon had told him. They listened in serious silence, the late afternoon falling in yellow bands across the short grass. Talon sat beside Knuckles, legs folded and head resting in his hands, listening. Suddenly he looked very young, very vulnerable and very tired. Knuckles noticed this and put a protective arm around him.

Talon was nearly asleep by sunset, barely waking up enough to eat supper with the others. Knuckles felt sorry for him and carried him off to bed. It was still early for himself and the Chaotix, so they remained up and outdoors.

One of the first subjects to come up was the disposal of Kit's body. "We really should bury him now, while the kid's asleep," Espio said morbidly.

"Yes," Knuckles agreed, "but someone needs to stay here; I would hate it if Kardot snuck back in here and got Tal while we were gone."

"I will," Vector volunteered. "I ain't scared of no girl with a sword." He rubbed his mouth absent-mindedly.

"Fine," Knuckles said with a nod. "And in case she shapeshifts again, we'll use a password to let you know it's us. How about--uh--" he paused and thought a moment. "How about my dad's name?"

Everyone nodded. Then Vector went indoors to watch over the sleeping Talon while Knuckles, Charmy, Mighty and Espio went off to bury the dead Kit.

There was one small problem.

They climbed the hill and located the terbium pit, but inside it was a great trampled area and no body. In the deepening twilight, Knuckles discovered a trail made by someone trampling through the grass. It was not Talon's trail which went in another direction; this one was so fresh the grass was still popping back up.

"I don't believe it!" Espio said for all of them. "Kardot came back and carried him away!"

"Either that or he wasn't dead," Knuckles said dryly.

The three stared at him. "Say what?" Mighty exclaimed.

"Tal may not have checked to see if he were dead or not," the echidna explained calmly. "He saw the wound, assumed Kit was dead and freaked. But he said Kit was still warm, and now he's gone ..." he trailed off and shrugged.

"Don't you CARE?" Charmy exclaimed.

"Sure I do," Knux replied. "Let's go home. If Kit's alive, we've got two maniacs to worry about."

Chapter 7: Nighttime Battle

=====

As the three topped the last ridge between them and Chaotix Central, Knuckles put up a hand and stopped. "What's the matter?" Mighty asked, wearily.

"Listen," the echidna replied, cocking his head.

Charmy dropped to the ground and stilled the buzzing of his wings, and Espio and Mighty, too, listened. They could hear nothing unusual--crickets chirping here and there, the whine of a mosquito. The sky above was deep blue, still tinged with purple in the west. A few stars glittered. The young trees about them were a solid black mass, the dirt trail faintly silver. The air was thick with dew-enhanced odors.

"I don't hear nothin'," Espio finally whispered. "What's wrong, Knux?"

"It's too quiet," Knuckles replied, his eyes shining in the

starlight. "C'mon, and not a sound."

They tiptoed along the path, trying to figure out why their leader was so sure something was amiss. Knuckles walked smoothly, relaxed yet poised, ready for anything. His eyes constantly roamed from side to side, ahead, behind and above. He was extremely calm. He was always calm when he was really afraid.

They entered the clearing of Chaotix Central. Knux ventured in a few steps, then stopped, staring. Espio, Charmy and Mighty came up behind him and followed his gaze.

The door to Knuckles's hut was standing open, the latch hacked out of the wood. The hut was dark and deathly silent.

The echidna said nothing, but his teeth were set grimly as he started forward. He walked fearlessly up to the open door and said to the dark interior, "Kardot, if you killed anyone you are in serious trouble." His voice was detached, as if he couldn't care less. He stepped across the threshold and vanished from sight for a moment while his three companions waited. Then the lights came on and Knuckles replied, "It's all right--nobody's here." The three looked at each other and inched up to the doorway.

The inside of the hut looked as if a tornado had passed through. All the furniture had been moved out of place, the floor littered with numerous smashed and broken objects. The sofa which had served as Talon's bed was gouged and ripped as if by giant claws, the stuffing bulging out. Knuckles stood in the midst of the chaos, arms folded and lips pressed in a thin line. After a moment he turned to face Mighty, Espio and Charmy. They expected him to explode in fury, but he was so calm he might have been exchanging the time of day. "Let's find Vector and Tal."

"How do you know they're not dead?" Espio said as they exited the hut. The echidna turned and gave him a look that permanently silenced him on that subject. Then Knuckles turned away and said gruffly, "C'mon."

Knuckles knew exactly where Vector would have taken Talon if they had been attacked. At the foot of a nearby mountain spur was what appeared to be a crack in the rocks. But if you squeezed inside, you would find yourself in a glittering cavern of salt crystals. At the rear of this cave was a tunnel connecting to the network of Floating Island's underground tunnels. It was known only to the guardians. Knuckles had shown it to the Chaotix when they had banded together and informed them that these tunnels were never to be used except in an emergency. Well, this was an emergency.

When Charmy, Espio and Mighty saw the gap in the cliff face they realized what Knuckles was thinking. They stopped and waited as the echidna, a shadow in the darkness, approached the crack and called into it, "Vector?"

"That you, boss?" came the familiar voice of the crocodile.

"Yes, it's me," Knuckles replied. "The password is Locke. Is Talon with you?"

"'Course. Where's Mighty, Espie and Charmy?"

"Right here. We're coming in." Knuckles beckoned to his two friends and squeezed sideways through the narrow space.

A flashlight was aimed at the far wall, creating a small pool of light on the white surface. The rest of the cave was hidden in darkness. The air smelled cool and very dry. Knuckles hailed Vector, then said, "Tal?"

A figure beside the flashlight rose to its feet and came forward. Knuckles felt the soft touch of the anteater's hands on his own. He pulled the youngster close and embraced him. He could feel the small body trembling slightly. "Oh Knux," Talon whispered in his ear, "it was frightful."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. She missed us both."

The sound of Talon's voice, so frightened and bewildered, touched Knuckles's heart in a way it had never been touched before. And into it entered the firm resolution to protect Talon as vigorously as he did the Floating Island. This little one needed him.

* * *

A little later found the six sitting in a circle on the white sandy floor with the flashlight in the center, pointed upward into the ceiling. The salt crystals, three and four feet long and shaped like giant fangs, flashed back the light like diamonds, reflecting the dim light throughout the cavern. A large stone had been rolled across the crack to keep out unwanted visitors, and the little group talked in relative security.

Vector told of how he had happened to look up and saw an armored figure passing by a window. Suspecting what she would do, he awakened Talon and had him wait by the back door. She came in the front, went straight to the couch and attacked it. When she realized Talon wasn't there, she turned on Vector. The crocodile stunned her with a slap from his thick tails, then grabbed Talon and fled for the cave.

Knuckles listened intently to this report, chin cupped in one hand, the other arm around Talon, who was sitting close beside him. His mind was slowly grinding into high gear. Kardot had a sword and was rather good with it. Swords must be fought with swords or not at all. Knuckles's thoughts darted to the emerald sword Sonic had discovered a couple summers ago in the Sandopolis pyramid. The emerald sword was unique; it had been created for the protection of the island. Unfortunately, it had adverse side effects on the user. It was the greatest of the swords; Excalibur, if you will. The seven lesser swords had been designed to carry into battle and were not as powerful. He would have to read up on them to be sure, but it seemed to Knuckles that the emerald sword was made of the same crystal as the Master emerald, while the seven had been forged from the super emeralds ...

He rose to his feet abruptly, mumbled an excuse to the Chaotix, then walked off into the darkness of the cave. There were a million reasons why he shouldn't do this, but ...

Knuckles went straight to the tunnel entrance in the rear of the salt cavern, unafraid of the darkness; he had roamed these caves and tunnels since he was old enough to carry a lit match. He stepped into the tunnel mouth, ducking his head a little to avoid the low threshold. He walked ten paces straight ahead, counting to himself, then turned to the right and put up a hand. His fingers encountered the rough, cool wall, and a loose stone wedged into a hollow there. He pulled it out. Light shown suddenly into the darkness. Inside the hole was a four-inch-long blue crystal, glowing with a pale florescent shine. He pulled it out and replaced the loose rock. The crystal in his hand was cold, for the light gave no warmth. These crystals grew in plenty down in Lava Reef--he had harvested several pounds of them years ago and distributed them throughout the upper tunnels for light.

He held this one before him to light his way as he walked on. The walls and floor were cool and smooth, beaded with moisture. The air was still and rather musty. These tunnels were not used now, although once they had been; they had been carved by his ancestors and had been highways to and from the now hidden Palace.

After a while the cold blue glow illuminated a passage to the left. Knuckles turned and entered it.

It was a shallow room with one low shelf at the far end, carved out of the living stone. On this shelf was a long, skinny object wrapped in burlap. Knuckles set the light crystal on the shelf and lifted the bundle. It was astonishingly heavy, as if it were a bar of lead. Gingerly he unwrapped it to reveal a sword in its sheath. The sheath was maroon leather, set with small multicolored gems. The hilt was bright untarnished gold, set with sapphires. With a tug Knuckles unsheathed it.

The blade was clear green crystal, transparent as glass. It weighed a ton; Knuckles had to use both hands to keep from dropping it. He looked closely, but the narrow green light the core contained when Sonic wielded it was dead. "You dumb thing," he said to it in disgust. "You work for Sonic. Why not me, too?" The green blade remained dark. With an effort he resheathed it and wrapped it in burlap once again. Then he tucked it under one arm, picked up the glowing blue crystal and turned to go.

A dark figure stood silently in the doorway. Knuckles froze, thinking of Kardot, then relaxed--it was only Talon. He beckoned to the anteater with the blue light stone, and Talon came forward. "You're quiet, kiddo," Knuckles told him. "Had me startled there for a minute."

Talon grinned shyly. His face appeared to be a floating mask in the dim glow; the black stripe down his forehead was invisible, but the white encircling his eyes stood out startlingly.

The dark eyes settled on the light in Knuckles's hand. "What's that? A chaos emerald?"

"No." Knuckles handed it to him. "Just a phosphorescent crystal. I use 'em for light down here."

Talon turned it over and over in his hand, then handed it back,

curiosity satisfied. He immediately saw the bundle under Knuckles's arm. "What's that?"

Wordlessly the echidna held it out to him. A faint idea had come to him--if this kid could use the emerald boots, perhaps he could use the sword, too. This hope was dashed as Talon's arms sagged with the weight. "Gee whiz," he grunted, "what IS it?"

Knuckles unwrapped it and showed him. Talon's eyes grew quite large. "Is it the cursed Master sword?"

Apt description, although Knuckles had never heard it called that. "Yes," he replied, then explained about Sonic and why it was kept hidden.

Talon nodded knowingly when he finished. "I read about it, how nobody can use it. Are you gonna try to fight Kardot with it?"

"Yeah."

"She'll slaughter you."

This was spoken so calmly Knuckles was taken aback. "How do you know?"

"It's too heavy, for one thing. For another, she's taken fencing since she could walk."

"You have another way to fight her off?"

"Er ... no."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you kept your opinions to yourself." Knuckles didn't mean to sound as irritated as he did, but it was rather unsettling to have Talon voice his own half- conceived thoughts.

Knux led the way out of the little room, but instead of turning toward the salt cave, he walked deeper into the mountain. "Tal," he said as the anteater fell into step beside him, "I'm going to take you to a secret cave way back here. It has two immediate exits. Only Espio knows about it. I want you to stay there until morning. If Kardot comes in here, you'll be able to escape."

Talon looked up at him, suddenly frightened. "Can she get in here?"

"No. This is just a precaution."

"Oh."

Neither said a word for another hundred feet. The passage was sloped steeply uphill, and they needed their breath for climbing. After a while Knuckles stopped and said, "Here we are."

Talon looked around the tunnel, not seeing any adjoining passages. "Huh? Um ... where are we, sir?"

"Look up."

Talon did and saw a large jagged crack in the roof. "Is that safe?"

"Normally, no, but it isn't real." Knuckles leaned the wrapped sword against the wall, placed the blue crystal between his teeth and scurried up the wall like a gigantic spider. He swung himself up into the crack and vanished for a moment, leaving Talon in perfect darkness. Abruptly he returned, still with the light in his teeth. He made a sharp motion, and a rope ladder fell to the floor, unrolling as it went.

"Wow," Talon said, and climbed it easily. Once at the top, Knuckles took the glowing stone from his mouth, wiped it off and handed it to him. "Take a look around. I'm gonna get the sword."

Talon held the light aloft as Knuckles clambered down the ladder. He stood in a small cave furnished as a bedroom--a bed, a chest of drawers and a round window, dark. Against the wall leaned a slab of what appeared to be stone, but turned out to be painted wood. Apparently you could lay it across the crack to block access. The crack itself was sculpted out of the stone to appear as if formed naturally.

"Artificial as they come," Knuckles said as his head popped through it. He heaved the bundle onto the floor and climbed up after it. "Dad and I dug this out when I was little. Major secret. The window is sixty feet up in a cliff--you can see for miles. There's a sort of ladder leading down outside, but you won't need it." As he spoke, Knuckles was walking about, touching everything fondly as he explained it. "You can go out through the window or back out through the tunnel. You should be safe. When I leave, put the cover over the crack and nobody can get in." He turned and looked at Talon, who appeared less than thrilled. "It's only for tonight, Tal."

Talon walked to the bed and sat down. "I'll be okay, I guess. Can I keep the crystal?"

"Sure." Knuckles took one more look around, then walked back to the crevice and picked up the sword. "You gonna be all right?"

Talon, seeming smaller, somehow, nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine. See you tomorrow."

"Right." Knuckles reached for the ladder, missed and crashed to the floor of the tunnel below.

"Are you hurt?" came the soft voice from above.

"Just my pride," the echidna replied ruefully. "Roll up the ladder, Tal."

"Okay, Knux." The ladder began to ascend. "Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight."

* * *

Knuckles quietly left the caves by another exit. He had no wish for the Chaotix to help out on this particular issue ... not yet, anyway.

He crawled out a little hole in the hillside, rolled a rock back over it and stood. The sky overhead was brilliant with stars, shedding a soft glow over the landscape. Knuckles's darkness- sharpened eyes could see quite well. The hill he stood on was carpeted with fine grass and sprinkled with daisies, a hazy blue in the night.

He unwrapped the sword, dropped the burlap near the stone where he would find it again, then unsheathed the sword itself. The blade was black and reflected no light, as if it were a void that sucked all light into it. He tilted it, trying to get the starlight to reflect off the edge, but could not. Whatever power the sword contained was stubbornly locked away.

Knuckles set off down the hillside, a shadow against the grass. His mind was gearing up into combat mode. She was black and able to hide in plain sight. His own red color would be grayish, giving him nearly the same advantage. His mind lingered an uncomfortable moment on the missing Kit ... if he were not dead, where was he now? Knuckles had never laid eyes on him and had only Talon's description to go on.

Still, he was fighting a girl. It made him uneasy. You can't just kill a pretty girl in cold blood, no matter how evil she may be. Perhaps he could get her to leave--intimidate her with his sword, maybe. He shook his head. Intimidate a sword expert with a blade too heavy to lift? Who was he kidding?

He entered the trees and crept through them, every sense alert. Where would she be? Hanging out in Chaotix Central, waiting for them to return? Not likely, after what she had done to his hut. He grimaced at the memory. He would have to spend hours cleaning up THAT mess. Would she have trailed them to the salt cave? Maybe. He had no idea if she were as woods-wise as she was sword-smart. She would definitely be trying to locate Talon; that he was sure of.

Knuckles turned east and began a wide circle back toward the entrance of the salt caves. This area had once been a dense wood, but the terbium had wiped it out. Dead trees stood everywhere, reaching their bare craggy claws toward the night sky. New growth had sprang up or been planted, but it would be a long while before it were forested again.

A twig snapped in the distance. The echidna froze, listening intently. Someone was out there. A moment later there was a quiet crunch, like someone had stepped into a patch of dried leaves. It was a good distance up the hill, to his left. Well, here was the answer to one question; she was not woods- wise.

He began to work his way in the direction of the sounds, ducking from tree to tree or bush to bush, the weight of the sword wearing on his arms. Whenever the sounds stopped he stopped, then continued when they did.

Knuckles had paused to rest and listen when a voice said, "All right, come out. I won't attack unless you move first." Kardot's rich voice was unmistakable.

Knuckles looked about and spotted her, standing in a little open area

between the trees. All he could see of her was a black blotch and a lighter area where her eyes were. He stood and faced her, keeping a tree between them and using it to shield the emerald sword from sight.

"Where is Talon?" Kardot asked.

Knuckles shrugged vaguely. "Oh, I guess he's on the island somewhere."

"Please guardian, I must find him. I'll pay you to tell me his location."

The echidna smiled coldly, although the darkness hid it. "Sorry, but I don't need nay money. How much were you going to pay me? Thirty pieces of silver?"

Kardot was silent for a long moment, apparently rethinking the situation. Then she said quietly, "I am sorry for what he did to your house."

"Bull," the echidna spat, "YOU did it. Tal's not strong enough to hack the latch out of a wooden door."

"No, but your crocodile friend is."

"Don't try to lie to me. I know what happened. Now let me ask you a question; did you murder a white anteater?"

That one caught her off guard. "Uh--well--"

"Admit it. You couldn't have him getting in your way, and you didn't want to share the armor." Knuckles's fingers caressed the hilt of his weapon. "Then you hid the body in a grass-covered pit. Easy. There's only seven people on this island; nobody would ever find him. Well, guess what--we did." If Kardot could lie, then so could he. He had never actually SEEN the body ... He could sense her agitation.

She was silent for a long moment, then said evenly, "I've had enough of this moronic conversation."

Her yellow blade flashed into view, glowing like a neon sign in the darkness. She sprang across the clearing at Knuckles, the sword raised. He had just enough time to yank his sword from its sheath and hold it up in time to block the blow. Stone met stone with a wrist-numbing crack and several sparks.

Knuckles nearly dropped his weapon. The weight combined with the force of the blow nearly drove him to his knees. No time to recover--the yellow beam was arcing back sideways. It took everything he had to swing and meet it. Another crack, more sparks. Three more swings in quick succession, Knuckles only just blocking them. He had no idea how to fight back; he may as well have been holding a stick.

Kardot forced him back, striking again and again--she made no sound, like a rabid animal. If he let one of her blows though she would kill him.

The turning point came when their blades clashed and held for a few

long seconds. Knuckles felt the hilt in his hands vibrate and grow hot, stopping just short of burning him. A thought came to him--twist the blade slightly and push her back. He did so. As she recoiled, he saw that the emerald sword was no longer black--a thread of green light shown inside it. The weight, too, had changed--he felt as if he were holding up a cardboard tube.

"She'll swing sideways," he thought subconsciously. When she did he blocked. "Curve low," he thought, and did so. She met the blow with her own blade--it was his first offensive move. He anticipated her next cut, blocked it and threw a couple of his own.

An instant later they were at it hammer and tongs, glowing swords flashing in the night, executing a deadly dance throughout the clearing. Knuckles fought without thinking, following each impulse as it came to him. Somehow he knew it was the sword that was fighting and not himself. When it glowed and was feather-light in the hand, it was at its most dangerous. It may bend to the will of the user for a while, but once their guard went down it took control of their mind, and then look out. Knuckles knew this; he had seen it's effect on Sonic. But at the moment, he was completely focused on survival.

A stab and a thrust he could not have predicted he would make, and the yellow sword flew out of his opponent's hand. His next impulse was to run her through, but he repressed it and picked up her weapon instead. It was heavier than his now-enchanted sword, but wonderfully balanced. The hilt was warm from her hand, and he could feel that the sword contained little power. It was just a glowing sword, like the inert crystal he used for light in the caves.

Kardot stood still, wringing her scratched hand and watching her enemy. She was once again a dark figure in the forest shadows, while Knuckles held two glowing sabers that illuminated his face and arms like lamps. Her slanted eyes narrowed in a hateful malice that overcame her outward beauty and formed her into a twisted shape of evil.

Knuckles looked up in time to see her flying at him. Her shoulder hit him in the wishbone, then her claws slapped him across the face. He recoiled from the onslaught, the breath knocked from his lungs. In desperation he swung at her blindly with both swords. The emerald sword, not surprisingly, was the one that bit into something solid. There came a choked cry from his enemy, a second of silence; then strong hands closed on the hilt of the yellow sword, wrenched it from his hand, and running footsteps receded into the distance.

When Knuckles could breathe again, he realized he was alone, his cheek was cut and bleeding, his lungs ached, and there was blood on his blade.

Chapter 8: Trailing the Quarry

=====

Talon slept fitfully in the silent room, the blue crystal on the nightstand beside him. He hated like anything to be alone tonight. He wanted to be within earshot of someone--anyone. Didn't Knuckles realize how frightened he would be all by himself? Probably not; Knux

had lived alone for years and had forgotten to fear solitude.

The youngster's dreams were constantly of Kit and Kardot, of being hunted through the dark, and of finding Knuckles dead.

Around two o' clock in the morning, Talon's sensitive ears caught the sound of someone walking outside his window. He jerked awake and listened tensely. No, they weren't outside his window, because the window was sixty feet off the ground. They must be at the foot of the cliff. He grabbed the crystal, shoved it under his pillow to hide the glow and padded to the window.

The world outside was ghostly and unreal. He was so high above the ground that he could see all the way to the mainland, although all he could see in the dark was a heavy cloud along the horizon. The ocean was wrinkled and held the dim reflections of the brightest stars. Closer in were the hills, meadows and woods of the island, and the bright curve of a river. The hills mounted higher and higher, robed in trees and underbrush, finally forming the mountain he was inside now. The air was damp, cool and still, scented heavily with the hay-smell of grass and the sweet scent of green leaves.

At the bottom of the cliff, someone was making quite a ruckus. Talon could hear feet slipping and clinking on stones and labored breathing. Every so often there came a loud metallic ching of metal on rock. He did not quite have the nerve to lean out and look down; for one thing, it was a long drop, and for another the stranger might see him.

In another moment he heard whoever it was give a faint gasping cry of pain, then curse under its breath. Kardot--only she could swear in three languages at once. Was she climbing the cliff? He had to know. Mastering his fear for a moment, he leaned out just enough to see down.

Outlines on the pale granite cliff was a dark blotch of someone clinging to the rock and climbing slowly. She was about twenty feet up already, muttering to herself and every so often whimpering in pain. She was headed straight for his window.

Three seconds later the curtains were closed and Talon was under the bed, hugging his shoes to his chest. In his terror, he did not stop to wonder why, if she were coming to attack him, she was making so much noise. All he could think of was hiding.

The minutes ticked by like hours. Kardot's grumbling voice drew nearer and nearer, and before long he could hear what she was saying.

"Ashi argo shi, he was using the Master sword. I don't stand a chance against that raka! Not at night, at any rate. Ohhh ... I am still bleeding. They will surely see the stains all the way down this cursed wall. One day I will kill Konya, yes, but first the guardian must pay for this. He will match every drop of my blood with three of his own, yessss ..."

Talon saw her hands grip the windowsill and the outline of her head through the curtains. She clung there a long moment, and Talon was sure she would kneel and creep inside, but to his relief she kept climbing. Apparently she was using her knife to aid her ascent, which

caused the clink of metal on stone. She continued to talk to herself, spewing venom for the world to hear. "If I kill Knuckles I will inherit this island. Yes ... not a bad idea. The raka told me everything it contains. Do not the ancient customs dictate the if anyone kills a guardian they must take on his job? It would be most satisfying ..." then she was out of earshot, climbing toward the top of the mountain.

He did not stir until her sounds of movement had subsided and she had gained the summit. Then he got up, pulled the blanket and pillow off the bed and dragged them underneath it. And there he slept the rest of the night, the glowing crystal clenched in his fist.

* * *

As dawn slowly illuminated the outside world, Knuckles's hand came up and slid the heavy wooden panel from over the fake crack in the floor. He climbed up softly, so as not to awaken his friend, but when his eyes fell on the empty bed he froze. No Talon. His gaze swept the room. No blood, no signs of struggle. And where had the blankets went? For one horrid moment the word 'kidnapped' flashed through his head in neon letters. Aloud he said, "Tal?"

Something stirred under the bed. Knuckles's heart resumed it's normal place in his chest. He strode to the bed and knelt beside it. Talon was wedged securely underneath, hidden in mounds of blanket, eyes turned toward him apprehensively. When he saw it was Knuckles he gave a heavy sigh, as if he had been holding his breath, then crawled out.

"What're you doing under there?" the echidna queried as he helped the anteater to his feet.

Talon was a sight--his fur was tousled from sleeping in cramped quarters, and his hair stuck out in odd directions. His sleepy eyes appeared large for his face. He looked up at Knuckles and squeezed his hand. "I saw Kardot last night."

Knuckles was instantly sober. "Where?"

"She--she climbed the cliff. Can you look and make sure she's gone?" In Talon's eyes was the idiotic fear of a small child, pleading with a parent to check the closet for monsters. His monster, however, was real.

Knuckles stepped to the window, slid back the curtains and leaned out. He immediately noticed the splatters of rusty red on the rock near his hands. He swiveled his head around and looked up the cliff--empty, of course. Without a second thought he swung out into the misty dawn air and clambered up.

Blood--here, there, marking Kardot's trail for all to see. He had hit her, all right. He followed it grimly to the top, which was a grassy plateau, sloping up to the next ridge a mile away. There were a few trees here and there, but not enough cover for someone to hide. His sharp eyes picked out a few more dark drops in the grass at his feet. An easy trail--

No, he wouldn't follow yet. He was unarmed, unfed and had certain people to look after. He would return later.

* * *

"Mighty, you go that way. Vector, you go this way. Espio, sneak along there and Charmy, go with him. Tal, come with me. Let's move!"

It was nine o' clock and the sun was well up. The dew had nearly dried but for a little near the grass roots, and the air smelled of sun-warmed green things. It would be a hot day.

Knuckles wore bandages on the side of his face and a steely look in his eyes. The emerald sword hung neatly on a belt around his waist, the jeweled sheath glittering in the sun. He had a full meal inside him, most of a night's rest behind him, and felt ready for anything. Talon walked steadily beside him, the bright blue boots on his feet. Aside from an uncomfortable glance at at Knuckles's weapon now and then, he appeared fearless.

Knuckles had several things on his mind, even as he searched the grass for blood. First of all, where was Kardot and how badly was she hurt? Second, would Talon hold up under this? Third, what was wrong in Knothole? He had received an odd transmission that morning from Sonic. The hedgehog's voice had been full of worry as he asked if Knuckles had seen Sally. Knuckles, still rather surly toward his old friends, told him no, and who cared if he had? Sonic had shocked him by telling him what a jerk he was and that nobody had ever really liked him, and if the Floating Island was the next to go he would be glad. Sonic had signed off without waiting for a reply. It hadn't been like him. Although part of Knuckles was rebuffed and angry, another part was vaguely concerned that something might be really wrong. Well, he had enough to worry about here and now. He would check back in later.

A buzzing in the air brought him back to the matter at hand. Charmy bee swooped up, his wings a mist at his back. "Knux," he panted, "Espie and I found something. C'mon." He whirled and buzzed away, Knuckles and Talon following at a run,

The honeybee led them across the plateau to a dip in the ground that all but concealed a large boulder. In the lee of this boulder was the remains of a makeshift camp--the ashes of a campfire, a smooth rock that had been used as a whetstone, and a blood-soaked rag that had served as a bandage.

Knuckles put a hand into the ashes--still warm. "She was here this morning," he announced to Charmy, Talon and Espio, the latter uncloaking rather suddenly. "She probably left when we showed up. C'mon--she can't have gone far. Charmy, head that way. Espio, keep to the trees and stay cloaked. Tal, fly straight up and see if she breaks cover. I'm going to the end of the plateau." The three obeyed.

The far end of the plateau slanted steeply upward for a hundred feet to the next mountain's flank, the peak of which towered above them. A small wood covered the ridge, mixed live and dead growth. Knuckles climbed halfway up the hill and stopped to look back at Talon, the only one of his friends visible. The anteater was hovering high above the ground, arms folded, a black silhouette against the morning sun. Knuckles waved to attract his attention, then held up both hands to indicate he had seen nothing. Talon repeated the gesture--no luck

yet. Knuckles continued to climb the hill.

In his mind's eye, the echidna soared away above the ground to view the terrain. He had glided over this area many times; on the far side of the wooded ridge was the outlet for the main waterfall, a tall cascade that plunged down seven stories into the river and was visible for miles. On his left, the plateau broke up into a treacherous series of rocky hills, leading up to the eastern end of the ridge. On the right the ground sloped away into a wide brush-filled valley. All in all, this was not the best place in the world for a swordfight.

He stepped into the first stand of trees and leaned against one to catch his breath. No sooner had he ceased moving than a twig snapped like a rifle shot further up the hillside. Knuckles's sword was immediately in his hand, and he slipped up through the tangled growth like a panther on the hunt.

The undergrowth and trees, living and dead, blocked his view of where he thought she was. So eager was he, he totally forgot to signal to Talon, or remember that his opponent was wounded and dangerous.

He did not remember until a hand grabbed his arm and a sharp, cold blade pressed against the back of his neck. "Freeze," said Kardot's smooth voice, "or you die most painfully."

Chapter 9: Kardot's True Colors

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Knuckles felt Kardot fumbling with his sheath and finally unclasped it from his belt. She tried to lift the emerald sword and gave a muffled grunt of pain and surprise. "You must be very strong to carry such a weapon," she said coolly. The sword thumped to the ground behind him. "Put your hands where I can see them."

He obeyed.

The blade of her sword was removed from his neck, then pricked him in the back. "Start walking."

"Where to?" "Uphill. I'm going to hamstring you where your comrades can see."

Knuckles risked a look around at her. Her sleek orange forelock was mussed, and her fur was tousled and dirty from sleeping out. Her olive eyes were very bright. She was still wearing the armor, and her right arm was wrapped in a violet scarf, stained crimson in patches. The wound was high--just below the shoulder--and somehow her arm was still working. The word 'android' flitted through Knuckles's consciousness and was gone. No android could be as sophisticated as a living creature. The wound was probably shallow; he must not have hit her as hard as he had thought.

* * *

Vector turned at the sound of thumping footsteps to see Talon racing up to him, half on the ground, half in the air, white as a sheet

beneath his fur. "Vector sir," he gasped, "come quickly. Kardot got Knuckles and Kit's following them."

"Whoa, whoa," Vector said with an easy-going crocodile smile. "Whatcha sayin', kid?"

Talon grabbed his gloved hand and tugged. "Kardot captured Knuckles--I saw her! And Kit--he's still alive--he's following them. Hurry, before they do something awful to him!"

"Wait a sec," Vector said, pulling his walkman from his belt. He flipped a dial, then said into it, "Guys, Knux found Kardot and he's in trouble. They're up the hill. Out." He turned it off, clipped it back on his belt, then noticed Talon staring at him. He smiled. "Knux rigged my walkman to be a radio. C'mon."

* * *

Knuckles stumbled on the uneven slope, and Kardot's sword pricked him in the small of his back. "Ow!" he yelped, half snarling. He whipped about to face her, his rising temper visible in his eyes. "Cut it out! I'm not a cooperative hostage."

Kardot gazed at him coldly, her lips pressed in a thin line. "I am not a cooperative killer. Remember, your sword is back down the hill. There is a clearing up ahead. March." She motioned with her blade. Knuckles had no choice but to obey her, which he did, beginning to seethe inside. No way was he going to let her cut him up ...

Unbeknownst to either of them, a figure in white fur was stalking along behind them, listening and watching warily.

Off to the right and left, the Chaotix were closing in at a run. Everyone was slowly converging on that clearing ...

* * *

Knuckles stepped into the open, temporarily relieved to see a level spot. Kardot was right behind him, keeping her weapon a poke or two away from his ribs. Knux walked out into the center of the clearing and turned to face her, arms folded. "Now what?" he snapped.

"You will suffer, Echidna," she hissed through her teeth, shifting her sword to her right hand.

Things started moving very quickly. As Kardot swung at him, someone rammed into Knuckles from the side, flinging him down. It held him there, shielding him with its body. Kardot stared in momentary shock, blade drooping toward the ground. "Kit?"

The white anteater flashed her a smile. "Hiya, Kard."

The Chaotix burst out of the woods at that instant and charged at the three. Mighty dealt Kit a stunning blow to the jaw. The anteater reeled back and slumped to the ground, stunned, and Knuckles leaped to his feet. "Look out!" someone yelled. Knuckles leaped back without seeing the reason for the warning, and so saved his arm from being hewn off by Kardot's sword. The tip scraped across his chest instead, cutting across his white crescent. Kardot stumbled from the force of

the blow and was temporarily off balance.

With a shout of something in another language, Talon ploughed into his cousin, teeth bared and hands curled into claws. She recoiled from his attack and threw him a savage punch in the snout. He stumbled backward, recovered his balance, fired up his boots and flew at her again like a little cat. She slapped him across the side of the head with the flat of her blade, then slashed for his neck. Talon dodged aside with lightning speed, his red and green soles shining like headlights, then shot in and kicked her hard in the soft spot in the front of her shoulder. Kardot gave a stifled cry and dropped her word; it had been her wounded arm. Talon snatched it up, but gave a yelp and let it fall--the handle was red-hot to someone wearing only the emerald boots. (Knuckles had been able to pick it up because he had not been wearing any of the armor at all.)

The Chaotix and Knuckles, meanwhile, had been waiting for an opportunity to join in the fight. Now that Kardot was unarmed they leaped in.

Kardot saw them coming for her and morphed into another Talon--a mistake, for the real Talon was still hovering in the air and it was easy to tell which was which. Vector, who happened to be the closest to her, tried to tackle her, but she twisted free, clawed him sharply across the muzzle and fled away up the hill, morphing back into her original form as she went.

The Chaotix started to follow her, but Knuckles stopped them. "Hold off a minute, guys. She won't get far. Is everybody all right?"

Mighty, Espio and Charmy were, and Vector's touch hide was barely scratched. Talon, still hovering, had a gushing nosebleed and one hand was pressed to the side of his head. Seemingly unaware of his own injuries, he floated forward and exclaimed, "Knux, you're bleeding!"

Knuckles looked down at the scratch across his chest--it was oozing scarlet and burned faintly, but was not deep. "I've had worse," Knuckles said, pulling a handful of leaves off a nearby twig and sticking them to it. "Tal, lay down until your nose stops bleeding."

Talon looked down and noticed for the first time that red had dripped all the way down his front. "I THOUGHT that hurt," he groaned. He landed and flopped on his back, head downhill.

"Knux," Espio called from nearby, "what about this guy?"

Knuckles turned to see the chameleon and Mighty crouched by the fallen Kit. The anteater's eyes were half closed and he was unnaturally limp. Knuckles noted the long scab on his chest--so he HAD been stabbed. "Hey Kit," he said, "we're not gonna hurt you. You can stop playing `possum now."

The eyes flickered open in response and Kit looked up at him. His eyes were a pale blue. He was not quite an albino. He sat up carefully, glancing uneasily at the Chaotix. "Look," he said to Knuckles, "I wasn't going to hurt you. She was going to kill you and--"

Knuckles held up a hand. "Yeah, I know. Thanks."

Kit climbed to his feet, brushing dead grass from his fur. He was as tall as Vector, which put him a head higher than anyone else there. His white fur was coarser than his sister's, and his tail was not quite as bushy. His only physical mark was a thin black stripe that ran down his forehead to his nose. He wore a dark green hunting vest and lightweight sneakers.

He turned and gazed in the direction Kardot had gone. "Listen," he said urgently, "we need to catch her. She's still got her armor; no telling what she'll do. She's more dangerous now than ever."

"Yes," Knuckles agreed, nodding, "but we're not leaving until we're ALL ready. Tal, has your nose stopped bleeding?"

"Not yet," came the reply. "Yuck, it's running down my throat."

"It'll stop soon." The crimson echidna turned back to Kit. "Why did she try to kill you?"

Kit's eyes darkened suddenly. "We had agreed to share the armor. Well, she ran off with it and I couldn't find her. I finally ran across her here, but when I told her it was my turn, she got very nasty and knifed me. (She probably still has her knife, by the way.) The wound bled a lot and I fainted. I woke up last evening and high-tailed it out of there. Now I'm out to get her." His teeth bared menacingly, but not at anyone present.

Knuckles looked around at Talon, who was sitting up and sniffing. "Okay," the anteater said, jumping up. "I'm ready."

"Then let's move!"

The seven charged up the wooded hill.

The trees thinned along the backbone of the ridge, and one could see for miles in every direction. On the far side the ground fell away in a steep slope to a perpendicular cliff. Out of the cliff face poured the waterfall. A thin veil of mist could be seen in the air, and the muffled roar of the falls could be heard.

The group was strung out in a long line up the hillside, Kit in the lead. Talon was hiking along near Knuckles, probably keeping close to him on purpose. Knuckles slowed, grasped his arm, pulled him closer and whispered, "What do you make of all this?"

Talon flashed him a queer look and replied softly, "Don't trust Kit. He's as treacherous as she is. Remember, he was the one who went after me with a whip. He'll get what he wants from her, then he'll turn on us. The armor is the root of this. It really belongs to you."

Knuckles was startled. "Me? I thought it was your dad who collected it."

"Yeah, but it was part of the Island Warriors' stuff. Now that they're gone, it belongs to the guardian of the Floating Island,

which is you. Technically, they're trying to steal it from you."

Knuckles looked away for a moment--it had never occurred to him in that order. "Well, stick close," he told his young companion. "Things could get ugly up here."

A shout floated down from the top of the hill, then a crash and sounds of scuffle. Knuckles and Talon broke into a run; the Chaotix had reached the top before them.

As they reached the full sunlight in the scattered trees on the crest of the ridge, there came a hideous yell and Kardot tore across their path, a furious expression on her face and eyes like green fire, her hands pressed to a spot on her leg. As she ducked into the trees on the right, Charmy Bee, Mighty, Espio and Vector emerged from the brush on the left. Mighty threw up a hand and called, "Charmy scored a direct hit!"

"Does that mean he stung her?" Talon whispered.

"Yes," Knuckles whispered back. To the others he said, "C'mon, let's get her! Where's Kit?"

"He circled off that way," Espio said, pointing.

Talon and Charmy leaped into the air. The others picked up sticks--Mighty picked up an entire log--and set out down the other side of the ridge, hot on Kardot's trail.

Their quarry had not lost her head. She had doubled back and was waiting for them to come after her from inside a large juniper bush. They would pass her by quite close. Her green eyes narrowed as she focused on Talon, flying high and searching for her from above. Forget Knuckles and her schemes for the island--those could wait--if she could get the boots, she could escape from the island and no one could stop her. It would take too long to kill him; a quick attack would be best. Her body tensed as Talon swept low, closer, closer--

He saw her a split second before she moved and dodged to the side. Kardot fell short in her jump, and her clash brushed across his fur uselessly. She had barely touched the ground before springing again, this time driving Talon to the ground. He yelled for help even as he fought back viciously, but most of his blows glanced harmlessly off her armor. She was not attacking--she was fumbling at his feet.

Suddenly Kardot was knocked sideways and rolled downhill several feet. Behind her stood Mighty with his log held like a baseball bat and a satisfied grin on his face. Talon leaped to his feet, pulled one shoe back on and exclaimed, "Thanks a million! She almost had me there." Then, downhill, "Knux, get her! She's getting up!"

Knuckles flashed out of the trees gliding and smacked into her fists-first. Vector and Espio followed to lend a hand as Charmy zoomed in from above, but Kardot was no longer fighting. She slumped on the ground and sobbed, "You're so rough! I can't stand this anymore ..."

Knuckles looked at his friends suspiciously.

"She's faking!" Talon hollered from up the hill.

Kardot appeared to be crying in earnest, hands over her face, shoulders shaking. The Chaotix looked at each other and shrugged. "What do you think, boss?" Vector asked. Knuckles shook his head. He had nearly forgotten his opponent was a girl, and for some reason, in spite of all she had done, he felt sorry for her.

"Look," he said, "just hand over the armor and you can go home. Okay?" Kardot didn't respond. He went down on one knee in front of her. "Okay?" he repeated.

Suddenly the echidna was thrust aside by someone in white fur--Kit. The anteater knocked his sister down and crouched over her. A knife glinted in his fist. "Hey, don't!" Knuckles yelped, grabbing Kit's arm, but it was too late. There came a queer gasp from Kardot, then silence, and Kit was wiping his blade clean on a clump of grass.

"There," Kit said cruelly to the quiet form on the ground, "Now let's see if you cause any more trouble." He stood, panting and clutching spasmodically at his chest wound, and found himself facing the islanders, all very grim-faced. His ears flattened and the fur on his neck bristled like an angry dog's. "Look," he growled, "she deserved it."

Talon, beside Knuckles, said quietly, "You always kick people when they're down, huh? Mom and Dad ... me ... Kardot ..."

"You cut your own sister's throat," Knuckles added, then fell silent.

Kit threw up his arms, the knife still in one hand. "She's not my sister, okay?" he roared.

"They all say that," Espio snorted.

"He's right," came a voice behind Kit.

Kit jerked around, and all eyes shot to Kardot. She was slowly climbing to her feet. Her throat was still cut nastily, but she seemed oblivious to it. She smiled sweetly at the group, who were staring with their jaws hanging open. "I'm not Kit's sister. I was built by his father, but I am not related to him. Cyborgs are not related to anyone."

"You should have remained off-line!" Kit exclaimed in accusing horror.

She gave him an icy look. "You didn't cut in the right place. Now," she turned toward the islanders, "if you'll excuse me ..." She darted forward, grabbed Talon by the wrist and fled downhill.

Knuckles was the first to come out of his shocked trance and gallop after them. The Chaotix stood and stared after them numbly and slowly drifted after. Kit remained motionless, gazing after them, knife hanging forgotten in one hand, the other pressed to his chest.

"Let go!" Talon was yelling. He thrashed about wildly, grabbing at passing brush and trees. He doubled up and clawed at her wrist, tearing the skin, but there was no response. Kit's knife had damaged the nerve sensor in her neck, and Kardot could feel no pain. Talon's mind raced. At the foot of the hill, perhaps thirty feet distant, the mountain ended in a vertical cliff with the waterfall pouring from a crack in it. If he knew his pseudo-cousin, she would throw him off and take the emerald boots from him once he was dead. Well, he still had them now. Why not use them?

Instantly the soles of his shoes lit and he shot into the blazing blue sky, towing Kardot along with him. Their momentum shot them out over the hillside at an angle as they climbed. Talon fought madly to free himself from Kardot's grasp, kicking her in the face and throwing himself in all manner of gyrations, but to no avail. The only change was, when he finally paused for breath, she simply added her other hand to her hold on his wrist. "Flop around some more," Kardot said tauntingly. "Really, do. I'm enjoying this."

Talon was hovering in place now, staring down into her dark face. Her eyes were an odd amber color, her hair flying in a loose cloud about her shoulders. She stared into his eyes, cruel, merciless, invincible. "Let go," he whispered, half fearfully, half hatefully.

"You have something I want," she replied evenly, as if dangling from someone's wrist over empty space were an everyday occurrence.

Although her weight on his arm and shoulder was painful and slowly driving him frantic, an idea popped into Talon's head. He plunged his free hand into his pocket and yanked out an oblong stone that sparkled in the sunlight; the phosphorescent crystal Knuckles had given him the night before. If he hadn't known what it was at first sight, there was a good chance that neither would she.

He held it out in plain sight. "Kardot, look! Know what this is?"

Her eyes fixed on it and a lustful gleam came into them. "An emerald!"

"Wouldn't you rather have it than my shoes?"

A look of indecision passed over her face.

Taking advantage of this, Talon threw it as hard as he could.

Her hold abruptly shifted from his wrist to the hair on the back of his head. The pain and weight shift threw him off temporarily. They dropped like a lead sinker. Just as suddenly her claws went back to his wrist and he righted himself. She was only holding on with one hand now.

The blue gem, somehow, was in her other hand.

If she could catch as well as that, what chance did he have on his own? His nerve failing, Talon cried piercingly, "Knuckles! Help me, please!"

"I'm comin', kid," came Knuckles's voice. Both anteaters looked up to see Knuckles gliding toward them, fists in front of him, nearly on level with them. He had taken off from further up the hill, and had seen the whole thing. "Hang on, Tal."

"Hang on?" Talon shrieked. "SHE'S the one hanging on, not me!"

Knuckles crashed into Kardot's side and whirled sideways from the shock, momentarily losing altitude. Talon bounced sideways several dozen feet before correcting himself, and Kardot's whole body shuddered. She swung to and fro, swearing venomously, dangling by one hand, the other still clenched tightly around the precious crystal. Knuckles circled back for another try, a fire smoldering in his eyes--she was hurting his friend. Talon, as eager as he to rid himself of Kardot, swooped down and placed Kardot directly in his path, then braced himself for the impact.

This time, before Knuckles could hit her, Kardot curled about in the air. She slid the crystal into someplace in her armor, then drew out a short, serrated knife; the one she had stabbed Kit with. With barely a twitch of her wrist she hurled it at Knuckles.

Talon saw it flash in midair, spinning like a sawblade, then Knuckles crumpled silently as it struck. Still travelling forward, he twisted, spun about and caught ahold of Kardot's ankle with one hand.

The sudden weight and the shock of seeing his hero injured, perhaps seriously, sent a rush of adrenaline through Talon's body. He stormed upward, then aimed a savage attack at Kardot's one-handed grip on his wrist.

She could not hold on, suspended in the middle as she was. Her mechanical hold weakened and tore loose, and with a shriek she plunged downward. As soon as she did, Knuckles let go and glided to the edge of the cliff, apparently unhurt.

Talon looked down and realized he was hovering almost directly above the cliff. Far below was the white blur of water and the deep green lake it pounded into in foamy shockwaves. Kardot was falling toward this like a stone, spread-eagled in the air. He saw her strike the edge of the cliff in a puff of yellow dust, then scrape down the cliff face. Then--somehow--she stopped.

Talon shot straight down and came to a stop opposite Kardot to see what had happened. She had caught ahold of a ledge jutting out of the rock, and was clinging to it with grim determination. It was slick with the spray thrown off the falls, only a few feet to her left. She dragged herself up on it as Talon darted upward to see Knuckles.

The crimson echidna had landed on the slope above the cliff. Knuckles was breathing heavily, but appeared unhurt. "Are you okay?" Talon queried anxiously. "Why did you fall?"

In reply, Knuckles pulled off his left glove and held out his hand. The blade had sliced through the fabric and into the skin--the cut looked deep and was only just beginning to seep red. Knux pressed the loose skin over it to check the flow and panted, "How's your arm?"

Talon waved it up and down distractedly, as if he could care less. "Fine. She landed on a ledge. What do we do?"

Knuckles shook his head and looked back up the hill. "Where's the Chaotix?"

"They're still comin'." The entire battle had taken only thirty seconds max. "Do we help her or something? She tried to kill me AGAIN." Talon was obviously not happy with the situation.

Knuckles panted for a moment without speaking, then said, "Fly down and tell her we'll pull her up if she hands over the armor."

"She won't."

"You never know. Just do it."

Talon shrugged his shoulders to indicate he didn't agree and that it wouldn't work, but fired up his boots obediently and dropped into space. Kardot was crouched on the ledge, hands pressed to her battered side. She sure didn't look like an android-- just a girl who had taken a beating. She appeared to be a trapped and wounded animal, green eyes wide and staring, mouth gasping for breath. She watched Talon as he descended as if she might like to eat him. He noticed this and hovered a good ten feet away from her.

"Kardot," Talon hollered over the noise of the falls to their left, "Knux says he'll pull you up and let you go if you'll hand over the armor."

An insane smile contorted her features. "And if I don't?"

"Um ... well, I guess you'll just have to stay there."

"Stay here?" she screamed suddenly. "STAY HERE???" She ripped her left shinguard off and threw it into the waterfall, where it vanished instantly. The rest of her suit followed, piece by piece. Finally she stood there in her clothes, bent slightly and holding her ribs. "I am a highly developed unit," she wheezed, eyes crazed with pain--her sensors must have kicked in again. "I deserve to be called an organism. I am as alive as you. But Kit treats me like a slave. My creator treats me like a slave. I follow you here and am treated like an enemy. What am I?" Her voice was becoming insane, almost unintelligible--she was malfunctioning. "What am I, REALLY?"

Talon was backing away from her in the air, ashen. The sight of her acting like that covered him in an icy sweat of deadly fear-- this was not right. This was the fear one felt toward a rabid animal, a creature out of its senses. But she seemed to be honestly waiting for an answer. He licked his dry lips with a dry tongue and croaked, "You're a murderer. You killed my parents."

Kardot appeared to snap. She gave a terrible cry and leaped toward him, reaching out with both clawed hands. There was no way she could reach him and she knew it, but Talon gave a great start and tore backward about sixty feet. He hovered, arms over his face, knees drawn almost to his chest, waiting instinctively for her to hit him; and so did not see the dark body plunge into the green water and vanish under the foam.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

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The sun was setting, turning the clear summer sky to a soft violet, with bright, hardy yellows and oranges in the west. The Floating Island hung quietly in the air, radiating back the heat it had absorbed during the day.

The Chaotix and Talon had been hanging about the Pool most of the day. The Pool was a deep limestone quarry a little distance from the river. Long ago, someone had dug a trench from the edge of the river to the pit, which had filled with water. The result was an excellent swimming hole, twenty five feet deep. It was known as the Pool, with a capital P.

Knuckles was alone at the moment, floating lazily on his back with his arms out to the sides. The cuts on his face, chest and hand had closed and were already partly healed. From a distance, you would be able to see nothing wrong with him. The water was smooth as glass and dark as root beer, reflecting the quiet evening sky. Crickets chirped comfortably from the tall reeds at the far end, and a few birds twittered here and there. It was very peaceful after the fast-paced adventures of three days before.

A splash disturbed the quiet. Knuckles sat up and trod water, dreadlocks streaming water, still feeling lazy and relaxed. Vector had arrived and was wading out to him, holding a bowl and spoon in either hand. Knuckles swam up to him and received a bowl, and the two sat in the shallows. Knux took a bite. "Mm, good ice cream. Are the other guys comin'?"

Vector licked his spoon. "Yup. They were still dishing it up when I left. They'll be along soon."

They ate in silence, savoring the cold treat and watching the shadows deepen around their pond.

Abruptly footsteps crunched on the dirt path. Mighty, Espio, Charmy and Talon came into view, each carrying a bowl. Mighty was toting the ice cream maker under one arm as well. He set it down, and the four joined the two in the water.

"Look," Espio said after a moment of good-natured silence, "my bowl floats." This sparked a bowl-floating contest, and experimenting with smearing the ice cream around to make them float level.

"Dumb," Talon said scornfully. "Eat all the ice cream and it floats great." Indeed, his empty bowl did float the best. He got up and splashed out to dish himself up another bowlful.

The gang watched him go. "You know," Charmy muttered, "I never thought he'd fit in."

"Yeah," Vector agreed. "He just didn't seem the type, ya know?"

Knuckles looked at the crocodile. "You ever find Her?"

Vector shook his head. "You know how the riverbed is right under the waterfall--it's pretty tore up. We'll have to turn off the falls to search thoroughly."

Knuckles gazed at Talon, bent over the ice cream maker. "Pick a day when Tal isn't around. He'll be mentally scarred for life if he saw her--like that."

(They did, too, but Kardot's body was never found. She was either swept away or escaped. However, the latter was highly unlikely.)

Talon returned and resumed eating his snack.

"One thing I'd like to know," Mighty said, leaning back and balancing his bowl on his knees, "is if she was a robot, why did she bleed, and why didn't it slow her down?"

"I asked Kit before he left," Knuckles said with a shrug. "A machine can run for a little while with low oil before burning up. That's what it was--red oil. That's why it didn't stop, and why she bled all night like that. She was in danger of shutting down when we were trailing her. It also explains why she was so strong ... I thought her strength was a little odd. She was a robot all along. Unbelievable." Knuckles took another bite and licked his fingers.

"And why did everyone call her and Kit twins?" Espio volunteered. He was a pale green tonight. "They're about as alike as an apple and a mailbox."

"I donno," Knux replied. They all looked at Talon.

He gave a jerk of his head that was smaller than a shrug and said, "My guess is that my uncle built her about the time Kit was born. He was a freak--white, I mean. So my uncle gave her black fur to balance Kit out, and they grew up with everybody calling them twins. I don't think she even knew she was a cyborg until recently."

"Wait, wait," Vector put in. "Grow up?"

Talon nodded and took a bite of his ice cream. Knuckles said for him, "She was remodeled piece by piece over the years, which gave the impression that she was growing. Robotnik would have loved her."

"Did you find the armor?" Talon asked, changing the subject smoothly.

Mighty nodded. "Straight up. Knux squirreled it all away, along with both swords." He gave the echidna a grin.

Knuckles took another bite before answering. "Yep. We'll get it out again when we need it."

"Do you want my shoes, sir?" Talon asked, then smiled. He seldom used the word 'sir' now. Knuckles shook his head. "They're yours. Keep 'em."

He kept his eyes on Talon for a while after that thoughtfully, even after conversation had taken other courses. The little anteater was a neat kid--he saw that now. Knuckles certainly hadn't thought so when he had met him. He remembered with a smile Talon's nerve in calling on the guardian oath to protect him. Now Talon was protected simply because he was Talon, not because of Knuckles's honor. He would be staying on the island as long as he wanted.

As he and his companions swam and talked into the deepening twilight, Knuckles thought of something else. He was still on unfriendly terms with Knothole. He had called in just that morning and Rotor had told him that everything was fine, but Sonic refused to speak to him. How much of the mischief had Sonic been responsible for? He doubted very much. He would teleport in sometime and see why Sonic was so mad at him. But not yet. He would wait to see Sonic's true colors before acting.

****The End****

End
file.